

NEWS RELEASE

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Birds and Poultry Free to “Fly the Coop” -- Most Disease Quarantines Released in Texas and New Mexico

With the exception of a very small area of Socorro, in El Paso County, the state and federal quarantines and movement restrictions on birds and poultry movement were lifted on June 5, 2003, on El Paso and Hudspeth Counties in Texas, and on Luna, Otero, and Dona Anna Counties in New Mexico. Since April 10, the five counties have been quarantined, while regulatory veterinarians and animal health inspectors worked to eradicate an outbreak of Exotic Newcastle Disease (END) in El Paso County.

“We are very happy to announce that END, a deadly foreign viral disease that affects only birds and poultry, has been wiped out in El Paso County. This disease does not affect human health or the safety of food, but it can devastate bird and poultry operations,” said Dr. Bob Hillman, Texas state veterinarian and head of the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), the state’s livestock and poultry health regulatory agency.

“Thanks to the cooperation of bird owners and the dedicated work of staff from the TAHC, New Mexico Livestock Board, other state agencies, and USDA, this disease did not spread beyond one backyard flock of birds,” he said. “To be certain, however, the teams tested more than 800 flocks within the five-county area and distributed disease prevention information to dozens of feed stores, producers, flea markets, pet stores and other retail and wholesale outlets where birds and bird-related products are sold.”

“With the exception of a very small area in Socorro in El Paso County, all movement restrictions in the five-county area have been lifted, and bird and poultry businesses and movement may return to normal. As soon as the USDA lifted its federal quarantines, the New Mexico Livestock Board and the TAHC lifted state-level restrictions. Feed stores may sell chickens, pet stores can market canaries, and other birds and poultry can be moved into or out of the counties,” said Dr. Hillman.

He explained that Texas must maintain a small, specified quarantined area for six months to regain international trading status for poultry and poultry products. This area encompasses the premises where END infection was detected, along with a small buffer zone. It is bounded by Tokay Avenue on the north, Fredonia Street on the east, Vineyard Road on the south, and Muscat Street on the west. Birds may be moved from this specific area only under a permit issued by USDA or TAHC personnel.

“We have been particularly fortunate that END did not become widespread in Texas or New Mexico,” commented Dr. Hillman. “In southern California, an END outbreak has been battled since October 2002, and it has spread among backyard poultry and to 22 commercial poultry operations. More than 3.5 million birds have been euthanized to stop the spread of the disease. Finally, it appears that eradication efforts are going well. However, because END is a foreign animal disease, trade restrictions can be harsh, and it will be some time before California fully recovers international markets for poultry and poultry products.”

“The key to eradicating disease is detecting it as quickly as possible, before it has an opportunity to spread. Although END has been eradicated in El Paso County, the virus could potentially be reintroduced. The disease is highly contagious, and if sick birds are transported into the area, another outbreak could begin. Also, the virus can be carried from one site to another on trucks or supplies, so it’s important to disinfect equipment brought onto your property,” he said.

“Check your flocks frequently for signs of disease, such as gasping, coughing, diarrhea or paralysis,” said Dr. Hillman. “If birds are sick, or if there is unusual death loss, call your veterinarian or animal health officials, so that samples may be collected for testing at the National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, Iowa. There is no charge for the testing.”

Dr. Hillman referred bird owners in Texas to the TAHC’s 24-hour hotline at 1-800-550-8242 or to the USDA’s Veterinary Services office in Texas at 512-916-5552. In New Mexico, bird owners may call the New Mexico Livestock Board at 505-841-6161 or the USDA’s Veterinary Services office in New Mexico at 505-761-3160.

“When you watch out for your own birds, you’re protecting the entire poultry and pet bird industry,” said Dr. Hillman. “Think of this as a ‘neighborhood watch’ program for poultry disease.”