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From Your Commissioner...

H1N1 Flu Precautions for Backyard and Barnyard

With the horse long out of the barn, major media outlets recently agreed to stop using the swine word when talking about the flu pandemic. Pork producers have been vying with dairy farmers as this year's biggest agricultural money-losers—with boneless center-cut pork chops selling for \$1.99 a pound in New Hampshire supermarkets—thanks to the media's penchant for calling the new H1N1 flu 'swine flu.' From the earliest stages, medical scientists explained this novel strain of influenza is a blend of swine, bird (avian) and human origin genes. Uninformed consumers feared getting sick from eating pork, and stopped buying it. Thirty countries banned U.S. pork imports for the same reason. All but eight have now lifted those bans, with China announcing late last week that it would reopen its doors to American pigs and pork.

State departments of agriculture and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack are emphasizing to the public that the pandemic flu virus is not a food-borne illness and can not be spread by eating pork or poultry. Calling the 2009 pandemic H1N1 virus currently circulating in humans "swine flu" has led to public confusion about the health of swine and the perceived health risks associated with swine. The World Health Organization and others have stated the illness is not spread through eating meat or meat products.

USDA has said there is no evidence to date that pigs are playing any role in transmission of H1N1 flu. USDA has implemented a swine influenza virus surveillance program in cooperation with state departments of agriculture and industry groups. When the 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza virus is detected in swine, such as the recent cases in at the Minnesota State Fair, USDA along with states will increase protective measures.

The virus can occasionally spread from humans to pigs or birds, so State Veterinarian Dr. Stephen Crawford advises people who own or work with pigs or poultry to take precautions to protect the health of their livestock. "As with any disease," he says, "prevention is far preferable to managing clinical illness, so basic hygiene, sanitation, and biosecurity are the most effective tools." Limit non-essential people and vehicles entering the farm or animal areas. Avoid visiting other farms or places livestock are kept. Disinfect shoes, clothes, hands, crates, vehicles and tires—all of which can carry the virus. Purchase animals from reputable sources and ensure documentation of the animal's origin is in order. Have any new animals checked by a veterinarian. Do not lend equipment or vehicles to other farms, or borrow them.

Pig and poultry owners should keep people with respiratory illness away from pigs or birds. Anyone who has been diagnosed with flu, has flu-like symptoms—fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, and possibly vomiting or diarrhea—or has had contact with others who have flu-like symptoms should avoid contact with pigs or poultry

Pig owners should understand and watch for signs of influenza in pigs and report symptoms. Signs include sudden onset of fever, lethargy, lack of alertness, going off feed (poor appetite), coughing (barking), discharge from the

nose or eyes, eye redness or inflammation, sneezing and breathing difficulties. If a pig shows any signs, owners should call their veterinarian.

Poultry owners should watch for and report signs of avian influenza. Dr. Crawford says diminished appetite and decreased egg production are typically the earliest and most predictable signs. Also watch for abnormal shells on eggs; cough; sneeze; nasal discharge; ruffled feathers; depression; diarrhea; discoloration of wattles, comb, and legs; and occasionally death.

Owners should report sick swine or poultry by calling USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service at 1-866-536-7593, or the NH Department of Agriculture Division of Animal Industry at 603-271-2404. "If an owner is concerned about influenza in their animals, please call," Dr. Crawford advises. "We would rather respond to 100 questions or cases of 'something else' than miss what could be the first case in an outbreak." Please see the announcement in this issue of grant funding obtained by the Department to pay for avian influenza testing of poultry flocks.

Lorraine Merrill, Commissioner