

PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON
ROBERT P. CASEY, JR., PENNSYLVANIA
TAMMY BALDWIN, WISCONSIN
CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, CONNECTICUT
TIM Kaine, VIRGINIA
MARGARET WOOD HASSAN, NEW HAMPSHIRE
TINA SMITH, MINNESOTA
BEN RAY LUJÁN, NEW MEXICO
JOHN W. HICKENLOOPER, COLORADO
EDWARD J. MARKEY, MASSACHUSETTS

BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA
RAND PAUL, KENTUCKY
SUSAN M. COLLINS, MAINE
LISA MURKOWSKI, ALASKA
MIKE BRAUN, INDIANA
ROGER MARSHALL, KANSAS
MITT ROMNEY, UTAH
TOMMY TUBERVILLE, ALABAMA
MARKWAYNE MULLIN, OKLAHOMA
TED BUDD, NORTH CAROLINA

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

WARREN GUNNELS, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
AMANDA LINCOLN, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

www.help.senate.gov

April 17, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Secretary Becerra and Secretary Vilsack:

I write to express my concern with the ongoing outbreak of H5N1, a highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), and request regular, transparent updates on interagency efforts to address this evolving health security threat.

H5N1 was first identified in 1996 in southern China, and has since triggered multiple outbreaks globally that have, in some instances, spilled over into humans. The current outbreak has led to the deaths of hundreds of millions of domestic and wild birds worldwide since 2021 and continues to spread to new mammal species. As of March, H5N1 had been identified in at least 48 mammal species in 26 countries.¹

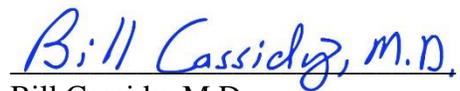
While infections in mammals typically occur through contact with infected birds, the current outbreaks within U.S. livestock appear to be spreading between the mammals, without new exposures to infected birds. Genetic sequencing of the confirmed human case has also revealed the

¹ Pablo I. Plaza et al., *Recent Changes in Patterns of Mammal Infection with Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A(H5N1) Virus Worldwide*, 30 EMERGING INFECTIOUS DISEASES, no. 3, 2024, at 444-52, https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/30/3/23-1098_article.

presence of a mutation that can impact the virus' ability to adapt to mammalian hosts.² As you know, widespread transmission of the virus among mammalian hosts significantly increases the risk that the virus could evolve to become well adapted to transmission among humans. While human infections are currently rare, the reported human cases since 1997 document a 50% case fatality rate.³ It is essential for federal agencies to remain vigilant in ensuring food safety practices continue to be monitored and reviewed as needed to prevent any unsafe products from entering the market.

As the Ranking Member of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, I request continued briefings on epidemiological updates on H5N1 in both animal and human populations, interagency coordination, guidance and technical assistance you are providing to state and local agricultural and public health agencies, and ongoing efforts to disseminate information to stakeholders. We appreciate your attention to this request and your continued engagement with the committees of jurisdiction.

Sincerely,



Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Ranking Member

U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions

² *Technical Update: Summary Analysis of Genetic Sequences of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A(H5N1) Viruses in Texas*, U.S. CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Apr. 2, 2024), <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/spotlights/2023-2024/h5n1-analysis-texas.htm>.

³ *Reported Human Infections with Avian Influenza A Viruses*, U.S. CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/reported-human-infections.htm> (last reviewed Feb. 1, 2024).