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Alaska Travel Industry Association - Avian Influenza Briefing

ANCHORAGE, AK / APRIL 25, 2006 – The Alaska Travel Industry Association (AlaskaTIA) is concerned about influenza and the potential for pandemic influenza. We want to make sure that Alaska's travel and tourism industry is doing everything possible to prevent the spread of influenza (or any other communicable disease) to our visitors and Alaskans. We also want to ensure that the industry, visitors and the public at large have accurate information to assess the situation and potential risks of influenza. We've prepared this briefing to present the facts as we know them.

Influenza (Flu) viruses are a group of viruses that primarily infect birds, but also can infect and cause illness in other animals, including humans. People can look at the flu virus on a scale of concern that begins with bird flu and peaks with pandemic flu:

- “Avian” (Bird) Flu is caused by a number of viruses found in domestic poultry and in wild birds, especially waterfowl and shorebirds. When a strain of the virus emerges that causes illness and death in large numbers of wild or domestic birds it causes an “epizootic.” These viruses are found only in a small proportion of birds, most cause few symptoms and are very rarely transmitted to humans.
- “Seasonal” Flu occurs every year when a flu virus that is in a form that transmits from person to person changes enough that many people lack immunity (are susceptible to infection). Every few years a strain emerges that causes an “epidemic” where more than normal numbers of people are infected.
- “Pandemic” Flu occurs when there is a major genetic change in a strain that transmits easily from person to person and no one has immunity. Scientists believe that pandemic flu emerges only 3-4 times a century. However, flu pandemics are explosive and can spread around the world in only a few weeks or months.

In 2003 an outbreak of avian influenza began in Asia that has scientists concerned. The virus strain, H5N1, is highly contagious among birds, and can be deadly to them. The current H5N1 epizootic is the most severe outbreak in poultry ever recorded and has been extraordinarily difficult to control. Over 150 million domestic birds (poultry) have been destroyed in the worldwide effort to control the outbreak.

So far, the H5N1 virus has not been found in any domestic or wild birds in the Americas. There is concern that the H5N1 bird flu virus could make its way to the continent via the wild bird flyway between Asia and Alaska. The virus could then travel to the rest of the United States via North American wild bird flyways and could result in a significant risk to the poultry industry.

Bird flu risks to people: Infection of people from poultry is a rare event and usually results in mild disease. However, the illness caused by the current strain, H5N1, is severe. Most of the 204 human cases have occurred in children and young adults. Human infection occurs after direct contact with infected domestic poultry, or with surfaces contaminated by bird feces. Most human cases have occurred in rural or near urban areas, where households keep small poultry flocks that roam freely, entering homes or sharing outdoor areas where children play.

A few person-to-person transmissions of the H5N1 bird flu virus have occurred, all associated with poultry outbreaks. It has not spread beyond immediate close contacts, or caused illness in the general community. Nonetheless, because influenza viruses have the ability to mutate, scientists are concerned that the H5N1 virus could one day be able to infect humans and spread easily from one person to another.

It is important to keep the risk of H5N1 (bird flu) infection in perspective. So far, no birds with the virus have been found in Alaska or anywhere in North America. More importantly, in the 3 years since the H5N1 outbreak began, only 204 people are known to have been infected and only 113 have died. Compare that to the seasonal flu: every year, around the world, it is estimated that between 500,000 and a million people die from the flu - in the US 35,000 to 40,000 die from the flu. The H5N1 virus is not easy to catch – in fact you have to live in very close proximity to infected poultry to get it. And, it doesn't transmit from person to person except in extremely rare circumstances.

The bottom line is that while the H5N1 virus is a grave threat to poultry farming, it is NOT a significant threat to people - in its current form. Currently public health organizations haven't called for any (human) travel restrictions – anywhere in the world, including those Asian countries hardest hit by the outbreak. The current glut of media stories represent an “infodemic” that may have an impact on the global tourism industry far beyond the actual risk of illness from the bird flu. There is a great deal of unsubstantiated and speculative reporting and not enough reasoned analysis of risk.

For Alaskan travel and tourism businesses, and their concerned clients, it is important to remember that the virus has not been found in Alaskan waterfowl, and even if it were, the types of activities that most of Alaska's visitors participate in pose an extremely small risk of exposure to the virus. Good hygiene and safe wildlife viewing practices make the risk of infection vanishingly small. Alaska's visitors don't need to worry about bird flu affecting their trip.

None the less, the sobering statistics about seasonal flu mortality should make everyone understand the importance of doing everything possible to prevent the spread of communicable disease – steps that help prevent the flu from spreading also help prevent Norwalk, SARS and other diseases from spreading.

AlaskaTIA has compiled a variety of information on preventing the spread of disease as well as links to respected public health agencies and posted that information at www.alaskatia.org/publicrelations/health_info.asp We encourage all Alaskan travel and tourism businesses, as well as the general public, to use the information available to become informed about the issues and to practice good hygiene to prevent the spread of disease.

The Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) is the non-profit, member-based, visitor industry trade association that conducts marketing on behalf of the State of Alaska and that represents the industry in the policy arena. ATIA's membership is comprised of more than 1000 businesses – from small bed and breakfasts to cruise lines. For more information about ATIA, please contact Dave Worrell at (907) 929-2842 or visit www.AlaskaTIA.org.

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