

Rajasthan gears up for bird flu

Rajasthan, a haven for migratory birds, is gearing up to tackle bird flu after neighbouring Pakistan reported cases of the deadly virus.

'We are watching the situation closely and have asked the poultry industry to take certain protective measures,' said Prabhulal Saini, Rajasthan's agriculture minister.

'At present, there is no reason to worry,' Saini told IANS.

Though no case of avian flu had been reported yet from any part of the state, the government had 'stepped up surveillance along the border and asked bird keepers to report any case of death or disease in any of the birds', the minister said.

According to Saini, surveillance teams comprising veterinary doctors and assistants had been constituted to visit poultry farms and places where migratory birds arrive. The teams are to submit their reports to the animal husbandry department on a day-to-day basis.

'Surveillance teams have started collecting blood samples at random in poultry farms.'

The highly pathogenic avian influenza (bird flu), caused by the contagious H5N1 virus, has resurfaced in several countries, including Pakistan, since the start of 2007.

Though the H5N1 infection in Pakistan was contained, a further spread of the virus through wild birds is not ruled out. This has also poses a threat to India.

Every year in winter, the desert state receives thousands of birds from all over the world. The Keoladeo bird sanctuary - once the royal hunting preserve of the princes of Bharatpur - usually gets 400 species of water birds. However, this time the numbers were less due to scarcity of water.

It is the birds migrating to India from other countries that are especially risky, say experts. The state also has a big poultry industry with over 6.3 million birds, of which Ajmer district accounts for over 2.5 million birds.

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