

### 2025 BIRD FLU EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN MARICOPA COUNTY

#### BACKGROUND

Maricopa Co., Ariz. experienced a severe avian influenza outbreak beginning in May of 2025. This outbreak resulted in the loss of over 6 million chickens. The outbreak led to the temporary closure of the impacted facilities near Phoenix while the company worked to depopulate, dispose, sanitize, and repopulate its facilities. As was disclosed by Hickman’s Family Farms, they estimate that it will take up to two years for their facilities to return to normal production levels.

#### SUMMARY

During the emergency phase of the Hickman’s Family Farms avian flu outbreak, chicken carcasses were disposed of onsite and in landfills to prevent the further spread of the outbreak. In response to the onsite burial ADEQ has issued a Temporary Emergency Waiver (TEW) requiring Hickman’s Family Farms to gather data and take actions to prevent impacts to public health and the environment. ADEQ continues to be committed to fully protecting public health and the environment and is diligently ensuring that Arizona’s environmental rules and regulations are followed and that groundwater in the area remains protected.

#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Who are the involved regulatory parties and what are their roles?**

- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) – Regulation and support of emergency response to the viral outbreak
- Arizona Department of Agriculture (AZDA) – Establishment of the emergency response command structure in relation to the incident and regulation of agricultural practices
- Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) – Regulation of chicken carcass disposal
- Arizona Department of Health (ADHS) – Oversight of human health concerns related to the emergency
- Arizona Department of Emergency Management (DEMA) – Support for the emergency response
- Arizona Fire Medical Authority (AFMA) – Provided a Safety Officer and support
- Arizona Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (AZVDL) – Tested samples from Tonopah facility
- Maricopa County Department of Emergency Management (MCDEM) – Support
- Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) – Support
- Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office (MCSO) – Site security
- National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) – Confirmed avian influenza

#### TIMELINE

- May 15, 2025**
  - Chickens at the Tonopah facility began showing clinical signs consistent with avian influenza
  - Samples were taken and sent to the AZVDL
- May 16, 2025**
  - Nonnegative test results received from AZVDL
  - USDA and AZDA decided to depopulate the flock
- May 17, 2025**
  - USDA, AZDA, and ADEQ granted verbal permission for on-site burial of chickens
- May 19, 2025**
  - NVSL confirmed avian influenza
  - Depopulation of the flock began
  - A Hickman’s Family Farms representative confirmed to ADEQ that on-site burial would proceed
- June 2, 2025**
  - AZDA and ADEQ directed the facility to cease on-site burial operations
- June 5, 2025**
  - Emergency contractor began transporting chickens and egg production materials from the Arlington facility to the landfill
- June 13, 2025**
  - ADEQ issued the TEW
- July 4, 2025**
  - Hickman's Family Farms to conduct sampling of private wells
- July 13, 2025**
  - Hickman's Family Farms to complete installation of dirt crown
- August 12, 2025**
  - Hickman's Family Farms to complete site-specific hydrogeologic study
- September 11, 2025**
  - ADEQ data review completed
- November 10, 2025**
  - If ADEQ has a finding of a "reasonable probability" Hickman's Family Farms submits engineered cap design and/or an engineered berm design

### Why was this an emergency situation?

Highly pathogenic avian influenza is a serious zoonotic animal disease that spreads rapidly among birds and other species, and can devastate poultry farms. While the risk to the general public is low, the virus can occasionally infect people who have close contact with infected birds. The outbreak in Arizona required swift action to prevent viral spread to other poultry and dairy farms, protect public health and food supply chains, and minimize economic harm to our rural communities.

### What happened to the chickens?

Approximately 2.75 million chickens were buried onsite at Hickman's Family Farms. The remainder of the chickens (approximately 3.25 million) and associated materials related to egg production were sent to landfills for disposal.

### Why were some chickens buried onsite at Hickman's Family Farms?

In situations requiring mass disposal, a variety of methods are commonly used including onsite composting, onsite burial, landfill, incineration, and rendering. The goal of any disease response is to dispose onsite if at all possible to reduce risk of disease spread. In this instance, composting was considered but sourcing and transporting enough suitable carbon was a challenge in addition to the time required to stage all materials at the site to build the compost windrows. Incineration in Arizona was not a viable option due to volume of material and containment risk of open pit burning during fire season. Rendering was not an option as there was too much material to complete in a timely manner. Landfill was a potential option, however, given that Hickman's Family Farms owned a contiguous parcel of land identified on Natural Resources Conservation Service maps as suitable for mass burial, in conjunction with a review of the Arizona Revised Statutes on agriculture burial exemptions and with approval from ADEQ and USDA, on-site burial proved to be the most expedient, approved initial method of disposal to protect the public and surrounding farms from the virus.

### Why was a decision later made to send chickens to the landfill for disposal?

As the emergency situation developed, and the number of chickens to be disposed of grew and sites of the depopulated material grew, the multi-agency working group determined that sending the chickens to a permitted solid waste landfill was the best option to protect public health and the environment. The landfill option already has protective measures such as those that Hickman's Family Farms now must develop for the burial site. Implementing this decision required tremendous effort and significant resources across multiple state and federal agencies as well as Hickman's Family Farms staff.

### What actions have been taken to ensure the onsite burial is protective of public health and the environment?

The onsite burial was constructed in a manner to minimize the possibility of impacts of the emergency to public health and the

groundwater. ADEQ issued a TEW directing Hickman's Family Farms to take specified further actions to protect public health and the environment, and to take additional actions if a potential for groundwater impacts are identified.

### What is a TEW?

A TEW is a waiver, granted by ADEQ, which provides temporary authorization allowing a facility owner or operator to temporarily deviate from Aquifer Protection Program regulations due to the tight timeframes that are faced during emergency situations.

### Does the TEW remove Hickman's Family Farms' responsibility to obtain a permit if it is determined that there is a reasonable probability of pollutants reaching the aquifer?

No. If the hydrogeologic study or other data demonstrates a reasonable probability of impact to the aquifer then Hickman's Family Farms will be required to take additional actions to prevent impacts to groundwater and obtain the proper permits for those actions.

### What does the TEW require Hickman's Family Farms to do?

Under the temporary waiver the company is required to:

- Install a dirt crown at the burial site and potentially additional engineering controls to prevent rain from mobilizing pollutants;
- Identify and test existing wells in the area to document current water quality and to track any water quality changes;
- Conduct a detailed site specific hydrogeologic study to fully understand how groundwater moves in the area and determine if there is a probability of impact to the aquifer;
- Set up a network of monitoring wells to accomplish the monitoring plan and hydrogeologic study;
- Regularly report its monitoring and testing results to ADEQ so that ADEQ can ensure compliance with the TEW and other rules and regulations as information becomes available; and
- Most importantly – take corrective action if anything concerning is found so that the aquifer is not impacted.

### What has Hickman's Family Farms already done to comply with the TEW?

As required by the TEW, Hickman's Family Farms has installed a dirt crown at the burial site to prevent rain from mobilizing pollutants. Hickman's Family Farms has also identified private wells in the area, is reaching out to well owners to pursue water quality sampling, and working with consultants to perform the hydrogeologic study.

### Does the burial of chickens create a risk to groundwater?

Based on current assessments by ADEQ hydrogeologists, the immediate risk to groundwater is very low. Nonetheless, the TEW requires preventative measures, a thorough study of the site's hydrology and ongoing groundwater monitoring. If any potential risks are identified, ADEQ will require additional preventive steps to protect groundwater quality.