

Environment and safety alert

Avian influenza

15/07/2026

Background

Bird flu (H5N1) is a type of virus that mainly affects birds. It can also affect other animals and, on rare occasions, humans. Appropriate early action can help reduce potential exposure to people and mitigate impacts on our wildlife and natural environments.

What happened?

Australia confirmed its first detections of H5N1 high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) in June 2026. In response, the Australian Government has implemented a coordinated national approach to preparedness and response.

Within the offshore petroleum industry, avifauna (seabirds) are known to interact with offshore facilities and vessels. Many of these species are migratory and may use offshore infrastructure for roosting or nesting.

To date, confirmed H5N1 detections have been identified on the Australian mainland and included migratory seabird species that may act as carriers of the virus, creating potential pathways for transmission to other birds and mammals.

Infected birds and other animals may exhibit obvious signs of bird flu or show no symptoms at all.

Common signs of bird flu in wild birds include:

- lack of coordination, tremors, swimming in circles
- difficulty standing, walking or flying
- drooped wings or a puffed-up appearance
- respiratory distress, including panting, coughing or sneezing
- abnormal head or neck posture
- swelling around the head, neck and eyes
- sudden death, notably multiple animals

For further information, refer to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) guidance on avian influenza.

What could go wrong?

Potential exposure and spread of avian influenza can occur through contact or interactions with wildlife. Infected birds can shed the virus through:

- bodily fluid
- faeces (guano)
- feathers
- respiratory secretions

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Additional consideration should be given to the movement of offshore equipment and waste that contains infected bird matter. Under suitable conditions, the virus may persist in the environment for extended periods.

Most human infections reported globally have occurred following direct and prolonged exposure to infected birds or contaminated environments. Human-to-human transmission has not been sustained. Potential exposure-transmission scenarios during offshore activities may be reduced by:

- avoiding handling sick or dead birds
- prompt notification and reporting of potential bird flu cases and seek specialist advice
- measures to mitigate personnel exposure to sick or dead birds or direct contact with contaminated guano (e.g. use of personal protective equipment (PPE) whilst cleaning guano deposits or handling contaminated equipment and waste).

Key lessons

Although widespread transmission has not been established in Australia, vigilance, monitoring and early reporting remains critical to preventing outbreaks in wildlife and minimising impacts on native species and the agricultural sector.

NOPSEMA expects duty holders to consider whether bird flu presents a credible risk to the offshore workforce and the environment in the context of their activities, and to proactively review relevant environmental and operational controls.

Duty holders are responsible for ensuring that environmental and safety risks associated with petroleum activities continue to be identified and reduced to a level that is as low as reasonably practicable (ALARP) and, for environmental risks, to acceptable levels.

Where credible biosecurity risks exist, including the transmission of pathogens, duty holders should:

- evaluate the risk using available information, monitoring data, operational experience and risk assessments
- verify that existing controls remain effective and are being implemented as intended
- implement additional controls where necessary to reduce risks to ALARP.

In addition, duty holders should ensure occupational health risks associated with potential bird flu exposure are identified and managed through existing safety management systems. This includes reviewing arrangements for wildlife interactions, handling sick or dead birds, cleaning contaminated surfaces and guano, PPE requirements, workforce training, and reporting and escalation procedures.

Avoid. Record. Report.

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Do not handle sick or dead animals unless authorised and appropriately trained. Contact with sick and dead birds should be restricted where practicable. Sick or dead birds should be managed in accordance with facility procedures that align with current Government public health and biosecurity guidance.

When to report

Avian influenza is a nationally notifiable disease. If you observe sick or dead birds, or other wildlife such as seals or sea lions, contact the Emergency Animal Disease Hotline (24 hours) on 1800 675 888.

Record the following information where safe to do so:

- date and time of the observation
- location (including GPS coordinates where available)
- species or a description of the animal
- number of animals affected
- observed condition and signs of illness
- whether the animal appears recently deceased or has been dead for some time
- photographs or video footage, where it is safe to obtain them

Legislation

“Operators have a duty of care to take all reasonably practicable steps to ensure that the facility is safe and without risk to the health of any person at or near the facility.”

Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Environment) Regulations 2023:

- Regulation 22(2)(a): “The implementation strategy must contain ... specific measures to be used to ensure that, for the duration of the activity:
 - (a) the environmental impacts and risks of the activity continue to be identified and reduced to a level that is as low as reasonably practicable ...”

Biosecurity Act 2015:

Duty holders are to consider obligations and requirements of the *Biosecurity Act 2015*. Consideration should be given to how offshore installations situated outside of Australian territory (12NM) continue to manage biosecurity risk to an acceptable level. Consider implications of low-risk determinations and/or ongoing arrangements with DAFF.

Related documents

[Notification, reporting and recording requirements for incidents – guidance note](#)

More information can be found at:

[Resources for bird flu - DAFF](#)

[Australian Centre for Disease Control](#)

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**NOPSEMA**Australia's offshore
energy regulator

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