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H5N1 bird flu in Australia: implications for wildlife, agriculture and health

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The H5N1 situation is rapidly evolving. Please refer to the Australian Government's [Bird flu website](#) for the latest updates.

Background

Since 2021, the high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) subtype known as [H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b](#) has spread globally, causing unprecedented mass mortalities in a wide range of birds and mammals. H5N1 is an influenza A virus associated with fast evolution, rapid spread and an expanded host range, including infections in mammals.

The transmission of H5N1 through wildlife populations is not considered preventable. [Transmission can occur](#) through direct contact, aerosol and faecal transmission, exposure to contaminated water and predation or scavenging of infected animals. In agricultural systems, the movement and trade of affected animals and products can contribute to [farm-to-farm spread](#).

Most mammalian infections have stemmed from scavenging or predation of affected wild birds. However, [sustained mammal-to-mammal transmission](#) has occurred in some contexts, including in marine mammals in South America, resulting in mass mortalities.

Australian context

Despite widespread outbreaks overseas, Australia remained free from H5N1 until recently. This has [been attributed to](#) Australia's geographic isolation, robust biosecurity and biogeographical barriers limiting migration of certain species.

H5N1 was detected in [Australia's sub-Antarctic Heard Island](#) in October 2025, and subsequently in [McDonald Island](#). In June 2026, the virus was [confirmed in sub-Antarctic migratory seabirds](#) along Australia's southern coastline in Western Australia and [South Australia](#). Further cases have been confirmed since.

While there are currently [no detections in poultry or evidence of mass mortalities](#) on Australia's mainland, work is being undertaken to determine the extent of H5N1 and whether it has become established in mainland populations.

There is a [continuing risk of H5N1](#) arriving from the north via nomadic waterfowl and long-distance migratory birds, particularly during the spring migratory period (p. 2). The movement of H5N1 through sub-Antarctic regions also increases the [likelihood of it spreading](#) towards Macquarie Island and the Australian Antarctic Territory, and further introductions into mainland Australia.

Risks and impacts

Wildlife

Native wildlife is [likely to face severe consequences](#) if H5N1 becomes established in Australia. It has already impacted several species in Heard and McDonald Islands, with [mass mortalities of southern elephant seal pups](#) recorded.

Water-associated and colony-breeding birds, raptors, scavengers and certain marine mammals are particularly [susceptible to infection](#). Impacts would vary across species and populations, with [particular concern for threatened species](#).

There are limited options available to manage the virus directly in wildlife populations. There is [no effective treatment](#) for animals, and broadscale vaccination is not considered [practicable or feasible](#) (p. 4). Vaccination may be considered for [priority, at-risk bird species](#) (p. 3), such as [black swans](#); however, this typically requires controlled or captive populations. [Mitigation efforts](#) include surveillance and monitoring, rapid response plans and reducing cumulative stressors (through habitat protection) to improve species' resilience.

Agriculture

As at June 2026, Australia remains [free from H5N1 in poultry](#). However, potential impacts on the industry include production losses, farm closures, increased human health risk and trade restrictions. [Response strategies](#) may include surveillance, biosecurity and movement controls, and mass culling (p. 60).

Following the detection of H5N1 in Australia, Papua New Guinea [imposed restrictions](#) on free-range poultry imports from WA. Additionally, one of Australia's largest poultry producers [locked down its WA operations](#).

Previous outbreaks of other HPAI viruses (genetically distinct from H5N1) in Australian poultry in 2024 reportedly resulted in [the loss of 2 million chickens](#).

A 2025 Australian Government commissioned [risk assessment](#) found that the overall risk to Australia's dairy cattle industry is low, but that the consequences of an outbreak would be high and likely to be nationally significant (p. x). [Rapid risk appraisals](#) for other livestock estimated low risk for pigs, and negligible risk for beef cattle and small ruminants (sheep and goats), with moderate to high uncertainty.

In the United States, outbreaks in dairy cattle and evidence of mammal-to-human transmission have resulted in significant [health and economic consequences](#) and [raised international concern](#).

Health

Human health risks from H5N1 are considered to be low. The Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization and the World Organisation for Animal Health [assess the risk](#) to the general population as low, and the risk to occupationally exposed individuals as low to moderate. [Human cases are rare](#), with no evidence of human-to-human transmission to date. However, ongoing H5N1 transmission in livestock [increases the risk of](#)

[the virus becoming better adapted to mammals](#), potentially increasing the risk of human infections.

When infection occurs in humans, it can [cause severe illness and fatalities](#). There are ongoing concerns about its [pandemic potential](#) developing through viral evolution and viral mixing in livestock. [Continued surveillance and monitoring](#) are required to detect changes in transmissibility.

Response arrangements

Avian influenza is an [emergency animal disease](#) (EAD). Government agencies, animal health organisations and industry are involved in risk mitigation, preparation and response to EAD outbreaks under the [EAD Response Agreement](#) (EADRA), and are committed to maintaining capability to ‘ensure early detection’. Infection in birds is a [nationally notifiable disease](#), meaning that suspected cases must be reported to relevant authorities.

Australia’s response is managed under [nationally agreed response plans and cost-sharing arrangements](#), including a [response strategy](#) that sets out the national approach and a [National Management Agreement](#) between Australian governments. Under these arrangements, state and territory governments are responsible for the on-ground response within their jurisdictions, while the Australian Government is responsible for national coordination.

Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) manages the [National Avian Influenza Wild Bird Surveillance Program](#) with support from the Australian Government. WHA and Deakin University have developed [AviFluMap](#), a tool that [integrates outbreak](#), migration and predicted susceptibility data to support planning.

The Australian Government has [invested over \\$100 million](#) to address H5N1 risks, including:

- \$37 million in initiatives for agriculture and biosecurity, including strengthening surveillance, biosecurity capacity and capability, and national response coordination
- \$35.9 million for environmental protection measures, including preparedness planning for threatened species
- \$22.1 million to increase stockpiles of influenza pandemic vaccines.

The government announced [a further \\$11.2 million](#) in May 2026 to safeguard at-risk native species.

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