

Officials gird for bird flu

By Howard Yune/Appeal-Democrat

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More than 8.2 million Californians – nearly a quarter the state population – fall ill; within weeks, 96,000 of them are dead. Hospital beds and life-saving medicines run out; businesses and transportation shut down, depriving the populace of money, food and their livelihoods.

Such is the apocalyptic crisis California could face during a severe outbreak of avian influenza, a consultant advising public safety officials said Wednesday in Marysville.

Gunnar J. Kuepper gave his guidance to fire, police and medical directors from nine northern counties. Even the strongest response to a bird flu epidemic, he cautioned, would only limit the impact rather than head it off.

“We have the potential to lose 25 to 30 percent of the population,” said Kuepper, a regional president of the International Association of Emergency Managers. “Biologists say the next pandemic will come, sooner or later.”

Past pandemics have wiped out huge swaths of the world’s population – an estimated 40 million each from bubonic plague in the mid-14th century and from the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918-20.

Now, biologists fear the havoc one virus could wreak: H5N1, popularly called the bird flu virus and common in China and other Asian countries. Normally virulent and deadly to birds but less so to people, the pathogen is potentially only a genetic mutation away from knifing its way past human immune systems worldwide – and capable of spreading undetected, via air travel by infected visitors, anywhere in the world within 24 hours.

With a virulent, drug-resistant flu killing as much as a third of local populations, Kuepper warned emergency-service leaders of the difficulties in keeping the sheer number of deaths from paralyzing business and daily life.

“How will you do business when this happens?” he said. “How will you run the banks when 20-30 percent of the workers are gone? What will the funeral homes do when you get this onslaught?”

Officials in the audience weighed in with their concerns, most of them tied to the stretched budgets and staffing of rural governments.

Do animal control agencies need special precautions to remove any dead bird they find? How could police forces keep order when three out of 10 officers could fall ill?

Lissa Bentulan, an epidemiologist for Yuba County's Health and Human Services Department, predicted the county would be hard-pressed simply to keep order – unless it educates residents on the risks of a pandemic and how to ward them off.

“It would be mass hysteria, making sure people don't panic,” she said. “The main thing is making sure people follow the health guidelines and hygiene practices.”

That was essentially the lesson Kuepper tried to pass on, to teach citizens how to lessen the risk of spreading pathogens – even by simply emphasizing the need for handwashing – and to aggressively close public places to slow a rogue virus' onslaught.

To Kuepper, even the ablest and quickest county response to a rampaging virus is only a holding action, something to buy time in hopes that researchers can quickly detect the virus and concoct a vaccine.

“Always wash your hands,” he concluded. “And pray for an effective vaccine.”