

Keep backyard chickens away from waterfowl

By Kym Pokorny
OSU Extension

CORVALLIS – Chickens populate thousands of urban backyards throughout Oregon – and in light of a recent outbreak of avian flu, people who keep flocks are urged to take measures to keep their birds healthy.

Jim Hermes, a poultry specialist with the Oregon State University Extension Service, said to lessen the likelihood of disease, chickens should be kept away from wild birds, which carry the disease but don't get sick.

Avian influenza has been diagnosed in a small flock of poultry in Douglas County, according to the Oregon Department of Agriculture. The infected chickens and guinea fowl had access to a pond visited by a large number of waterfowl. The Oregon occurrence follows on the heels of a major outbreak in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada.

Unlike other strains, the current virus (H8N5) is not a threat to humans and doesn't affect chicken meat and egg products, which are still safe to eat, Hermes said. Concern is for the commercial poultry industry.

Hermes said people have a responsibility to learn how to raise a flock before bringing chicks home. First, research the rules. Some cities allow only a certain amount of birds – three is a common number. Others require a permit. Contact your city for specifics.

Roosters, because they are so noisy, are likely not allowed, which shouldn't

cause dismay unless fertile eggs are a goal. Most people, though, raise chickens for the eggs.

"There's the perception that it's cheaper than buying eggs at the store," Hermes said, "but that's not necessarily true. Minimally, though, people raise their own chickens so they know what they're being fed. They want to feed them specific things of their own choosing."

However, Hermes warns backyard enthusiasts not to get off base with what they feed their flock. Though they've been described as quasi garbage disposals, chickens need a balanced diet for maximum egg production. Some table scraps are OK; just don't overdo it. If they clean it up in about 20 minutes, that's about right.

"Get what they have at the feed store," Hermes said. "That sack of feed has everything they need."

Be sure to get the right mix for their age, too. Starter diets are formulated for chicks from hatch to a few weeks old. Grower feed is for adolescent birds. And layer feed, which has the important addition of calcium, is for egg-producing chickens.

Some people like to offer supplements such as grit, which helps them grind their food, or oyster shell, which has calcium. The birds will take these supplements if needed.

When choosing chickens to start your flock, Hermes suggests buying four to six good producers and staying away from exotic breeds, which don't lay as many eggs. Feed stores sell young birds in the

spring, usually from March to May. You can expect pullets (young females) to begin laying eggs at 18 to 20 weeks, and produce seven to eight per hen over a 10-day period.

Don't be surprised when your hens stop laying eggs in the winter.

"Decreased daylight causes hens to molt and cease egg production, a process that may take several months," Hermes said. Artificial lighting, however, can keep hens laying. See "Why Did My Chickens Stop Laying" at the OSU Extension website, for more information on artificial lighting.

Any structure that provides protection from the weather and predators will do for a chicken coop. It needn't be big. Before you begin building, get detailed advice from the Extension's audio-visual guide called "Backyard Chicken Coop Design." Keeping your birds inside won't distress them.

"You can give chickens access to the outside through a door, but they'll usually choose to stay put in inclement weather," Hermes said. "They don't use large areas well. They like to be in groups. One chicken is a lonely bird."

Provide nesting places that are a foot or more above the ground. Hens feel much safer when laying eggs in a protected space. Roosts or perching areas are also important because hens prefer not to sleep on the ground. Roosts also concentrate nighttime manure for easy cleaning. Fencing can be a valuable addition, sometimes electric fencing, as protection against dogs, raccoons and other

predators. Wire netting or some other barrier over top of the coop is needed if birds such as hawks, eagles and owls decide chickens are their preferred meal.

There are a few drawbacks to raising chickens, including odor and the flies it draws. But good management and keeping the manure dry will reduce these problems.

And rodents are a given. "Wherever you have chicken feed, you have rodents," Hermes said. "The best solution is rodent-resistant feeders, covered food storage such as a trash can and cleaning up any spilled feed immediately."

Cleaning the coop once a week helps, Hermes said, and the chicken manure – which is high in nitrogen – is a welcome addition to the compost pile. Washing down the coop isn't necessary unless there's been an illness in your flock or the possibility of exposure to the avian flu is high.

Waterfowl go north for winter, he added, so the threat of the virus is greatly diminished.

"If there's another outbreak," he said, "you'll know about it."

Learn more about keeping chickens in OSU Extension's handout called "Raising Chickens in Urban Environments."

73,000 Oregonians enroll at federal health site

PORTLAND (AP) — Just over 73,000 Oregonians have enrolled in private health insurance through the federal website that replaced Cover Oregon's failed portal.

The figures released Tuesday by the federal government show coverage that will begin on January 1.

Oregon's enrollments for the start of 2015 fall slightly short of the 77,000 people who currently have coverage through the health insurance exchange.

Because of the switch to a federally run website, Oregonians who enrolled in 2014 were not automatically re-enrolled for next year. A Cover Oregon spokeswoman says it's not clear how many people who signed up for coverage in the new year are currently covered.

About 79 percent of people who selected plans are receiving federal subsidies.


Oregonians can continue enrolling at HealthCare.gov until February 15, but coverage won't begin immediately.

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