

Idaho county fairs exclude ducks, geese amid avian flu concerns

Scott Maben/SR

Ducks and geese are absent from county fair exhibits across North Idaho this year due to concerns about avian flu.

Infected waterfowl can appear healthy and spread the virus to poultry, so the Idaho Department of Agriculture recommended county fair boards bar the birds from exhibits and shows.

The North Idaho Fair in Kootenai County is following the recommendation for the fair that starts next Wednesday. So are the Benewah and Boundary county fairs, which began this week, and the Bonner County Fair, held last week. Shoshone County doesn't host a fair.

The highly pathogenic avian influenza led to the destruction of about 48 million chickens and turkeys in the U.S. since last December. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is preparing to stockpile a bird flu vaccine as the agency plans for a possible return of the virus.

Idaho detected three small outbreaks in January, including in a girl's 4-H chicken flock in Canyon County. Three captive hunting peregrine falcons in Canyon County and two privately owned gyrfalcons in Kootenai County also died from avian flu that month. Waterfowl migrating along the Pacific flyway likely exposed these birds, public health officials said. The gyrfalcons had eaten wild ducks collected in Oregon.

The state's waterfowl recommendation was made "out of an abundance of caution," said Bill Barton, the state veterinarian. "With the congregation of poultry and potentially waterfowl at the fairs, we thought it was warranted to make the recommendation that they not congregate waterfowl at the fairs this year, particularly in close proximity to poultry."

Avian flu typically doesn't kill waterfowl, but the birds continue to shed the virus, threatening poultry, Barton said.

A less contagious strain of low pathogenic avian flu was found in a southwestern Idaho game bird farm in 2008.

The Spokane County Interstate Fair, which begins Sept. 11, has not canceled its waterfowl or poultry shows, said Rich Hartzell, director of the Fair and Expo Center. The fair requires birds from out of state to have proof of a negative avian flu test, Hartzell said.