

## HICKMAN'S FAMILY FARMS BIRD FLU EMERGENCY

### BACKGROUND

Hickman's Family Farms experienced a severe avian influenza outbreak beginning in May of 2025. This outbreak resulted in the loss of over six million chickens. The outbreak led to the temporary closure of the Hickman's Family Farms facilities near Phoenix while the company worked to depopulate, dispose, sanitize, and repopulate its facilities. Hickman's Family Farms estimates that it will take up to two years for the facilities to return to normal production levels.

### SUMMARY


During the emergency phase of the Hickman's Family Farms avian flu outbreak, chicken carcasses were disposed of onsite and in landfills to prevent the further spread of the outbreak. In response to the onsite burial ADEQ has issued a Temporary Emergency Waiver (TEW) requiring Hickman's Family Farms to gather data and take actions to prevent impacts to public health and the environment. ADEQ and AZDA continue to be committed to fully protecting public health and the environment and ADEQ is diligently ensuring that Arizona's environmental rules and regulations are followed and that groundwater in the area continues to be protected.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Who are the involved regulatory parties and what are their roles?**

- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) – Leading regulation and emergency response to the viral outbreak and the final disposition of the chicken carcasses
- Arizona Department of Agriculture (AZDA) – Establishment of the emergency response command structure in relation to the incident and regulation of agricultural practices
- Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) – Regulation of chicken carcass disposal
- Arizona Department of Health (ADHS) – Oversight of human health concerns related to the emergency
- Arizona Department of Emergency Management (DEMA) – Support for the emergency response
- Arizona Fire Medical Authority (AFMA) – Provided a Safety Officer and support
- Arizona Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (AZVDL) – Tested samples from Tonopah facility
- Maricopa County Department of Emergency Management (MCDEM) – Support
- Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) – Support
- Maricopa County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) – Site security
- Flood Control District of Maricopa County – Excavation permitting
- National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) – Confirmed avian influenza

### TIMELINE

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- May 15, 2025**
    - Chickens at the Tonopah facility began showing clinical signs consistent with avian influenza
    - Samples were taken and sent to the AZVDL
  - May 16, 2025**
    - Nonnegative test results received from AZVDL (positive test results are only determined by NVSL, so AZVDL's results are negative or "nonnegative")
    - USDA and AZDA decide to depopulate the flock
  - May 17, 2025**
    - USDA, AZDA and ADEQ grant verbal permission for on-site burial of chickens
  - May 19, 2025**
    - NVSL confirms avian influenza
    - Depopulation of the flock begins
    - Hickman's Family Farms representative confirms to ADEQ that on-site burial will proceed
  - June 2, 2025**
    - AZDA and ADEQ directed the facility to cease on-site burial operations
  - June 5, 2025**
    - Emergency contractor begins transporting chickens and egg production materials from the Arlington facility to the landfill
  - June 13, 2025**
    - ADEQ issues the TEW
  - July 2025**
    - Hickman's Family Farm identifies and contacts nearby private well owners about sampling
    - Sample collection begins on July 16, 2025
    - 11 samples are collected and tested
    - Hickman's Family Farms completes installation of the dirt crown on July 4, 2025
  - August 2025**
    - Hickman's Family Farms submitted a site-specific hydrogeologic study to ADEQ on Aug. 22, 2025, which is currently under review by ADEQ. Note that ADEQ approved a 10 day extension for submission.
  - September 2025**
    - ADEQ to complete review of Hickman's Family Farms site-specific hydrogeologic study
  - November 2025**
    - If ADEQ has a finding of a "reasonable probability" Hickman's Family Farms submits engineered cap design and/or and engineered berm design

## COMMUNITY UPDATE: HICKMAN'S FAMILY FARMS BIRD FLU EMERGENCY

### Why was this an emergency situation?

Highly pathogenic avian influenza is a serious zoonotic animal disease that spreads rapidly among birds and, potentially, other species. It can devastate poultry farms. While the risk to the general public is low, the virus can occasionally infect people who have close contact with infected birds. The outbreak in Arizona required swift action to prevent viral spread to other poultry and dairy farms, protect public health and food supply chains, and minimize economic harm to our rural communities.

### What happened to the chickens?

Approximately 2.75 million chickens were buried onsite at Hickman's Family Farms. The remainder of the chickens (approximately 3.25 million) and associated materials related to egg production were sent to landfills for disposal.

### Why were some chickens buried onsite at Hickman's Family Farms?

In situations requiring mass disposal, a variety of methods are commonly used including onsite composting, onsite burial, landfill, incineration, and rendering. All options are available based on the circumstances and most appropriate means of disposal. The goal of any disease response is to dispose onsite if at all possible to reduce risk of disease spread. In this instance, composting was considered but sourcing and transporting enough suitable carbon was a challenge in addition to the time required to stage all materials at the site to build the compost windrows. Incineration in Arizona was not a viable option due to volume of material and containment risk of open pit burning during fire season. Rendering was not an option as there was too much material to complete in a timely manner. Landfill was a potential option, however, given that Hickman's Family Farms owned a contiguous parcel of land identified on Natural Resources Conservation Service maps as suitable for mass burial, in conjunction with a review of the Arizona Revised Statutes on agriculture burial exemptions and with approval from ADEQ and USDA, on-site burial proved to be the most expedient, approved initial method of disposal to protect the public and surrounding farms from the virus.

### Why was a decision made to send chickens to the landfill for disposal?

As the emergency situation developed, and the number of chickens to be disposed of grew and locations of the chickens increased, the multi-agency working group determined that sending the chickens to a permitted solid waste landfill was the best option to protect public health and the environment. The landfill option already has protective measures such as those that Hickman's Family Farms may have to develop for the burial site. Implementing this decision required tremendous effort and significant resources across multiple state and federal agencies as well as Hickman's Family Farms staff.

### What actions have been taken to ensure the onsite burial is protective of public health and the environment?

The onsite burial was constructed in a manner consistent with USDA guidelines to minimize the possibility of impacts of the emergency to public health and the groundwater. ADEQ issued a TEW directing Hickman's Family Farms to take specified further actions to protect public health and the environment, and to take additional actions if a potential for groundwater impacts is identified.

### What is a TEW?

A TEW is a waiver, granted by ADEQ, which provides temporary authorization allowing a facility owner or operator to temporarily deviate from Aquifer Protection Program regulations due to the tight timeframes that are faced during emergency situations.

### Does the TEW remove Hickman's Family Farms' responsibility to obtain a permit if it is determined that there is a reasonable probability of pollutants reaching the aquifer?

No, if the hydrogeologic study or other data demonstrates a reasonable probability of impact to the aquifer then Hickman's Family Farms will be required to take additional actions to prevent impacts to groundwater and obtain the proper permits for those actions.

### What does the TEW require Hickman's Family Farms to do?

At minimum and regardless of a reasonable probability finding, under the temporary waiver the company is required to:

- **COMPLETED** – Install a dirt crown at the burial site and potentially additional engineering controls to prevent rain from mobilizing pollutants;
- **IN PROGRESS** – Identify and test existing wells in the area to document current water quality and to track any water quality changes;
- **YET TO DO** – Conduct a detailed site specific hydrogeologic study to fully understand how groundwater moves in the area and determine if there is a probability of impact to the aquifer;
- **YET TO DO** – Set up a network of monitoring wells to accomplish the monitoring plan and hydrogeologic study;
- **YET TO DO** – Regularly report its monitoring and testing results to ADEQ so that ADEQ can ensure compliance with the TEW and other rules and regulations as information becomes available; and
- **Most importantly** – Take corrective action if anything concerning is found so that the aquifer is not impacted.

### Does the burial of chickens create a risk to groundwater?

Based on current assessments by ADEQ hydrogeologists, the immediate risk to groundwater is very low. Nonetheless, the TEW requires preventive measures, a thorough study of the site's hydrology and ongoing groundwater monitoring. If any potential risks are identified, ADEQ will require additional preventive steps to protect groundwater quality.