



## H5N1 Listening Session Summary

On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024, The National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) hosted a virtual listening session with dairy workers from different states across the U.S. and staff from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). The main meeting objectives were 1) To understand specific implementation issues with the current CDC H5N1 PPE recommendations for workers on dairy farms, 2) to identify potential solutions to identified implementation issues, and 3) to understand the most effective methods for reaching dairy workers with H5N1 information. Seven workers from Colorado, Washington, Texas, and Vermont participated in the meeting, five of whom were employed in milkshed regions with documented H5N1 infections in dairy cattle. Their occupations within dairy farms included cow milkers, animal feeders, and a crew supervisor. Two workers were known to NCFH staff through prior data collection efforts about COVID-19, and five workers were referred to NCFH from farmworker-serving organizations. Seven staff members from CDC and ten staff from NCFH also participated in the meeting. NCFH and CDC staff collaborated on the objectives and agenda of the meeting, and NCFH staff facilitated the meeting.

### Knowledge of H5N1 bird flu

Workers were asked if they had heard anything related to the avian influenza or H5N1 at work or in their communities. All workers said they hadn't heard anything about it and that they didn't have any knowledge of anyone who has been sick because of H5N1 from cows. Five of the seven workers are employed in milksheds with documented H5N1 in dairy cattle (Texas panhandle/northeastern New Mexico and northeastern Colorado milksheds). They have not seen anything about H5N1 bird flu through social media. *[Note: In preparation for the listening session, NCFH staff discussed the technical logistics of the meeting with workers, informed workers that it would be about avian influenza that had infected dairy cattle and three dairy workers, and reviewed the current CDC PPE guidelines so workers would be familiar with the PPE guidelines prior to the meeting. NCFH staff did not provide any more information about H5N1 prior to the meeting.]*

*“Nomás nos dijeron nada más que nos desinfectemos las manos y las botas para entrar a la lechería, porque según nos dijeron los de ahí que les podemos llevar enfermedades a las vacas, nunca nos dijeron si las vacas nos pueden afectar alguna enfermedad, sino que dijeron que quizás nosotros llevamos alguna enfermedad para las vacas”. // “They just told us to disinfect our hands and boots before entering the dairy because according to what they told us there, we could bring illnesses to the cows, they never told us if the cow could infect us with some illness, instead they said that perhaps we carry disease for the cows”.*

## Working Conditions

Most workers shared that they have worked in the dairy farms for several years. They mentioned that milking cows is one of the most challenging jobs on a dairy farm. For example, to milk 2,000 cows, they work eight- to twelve-hour shifts with the support of milking machines. In farms where the milking is done manually, shifts are also long, and they work with four to five other people to complete all the tasks involved in milking cows. During the cold of the winter, they do not have heating and during the summer they do not have fans. Several workers reported that they have only fifteen minutes during the day for their lunch breaks and don't have enough time to take water breaks or even wash their hands. Workers who feed animals or take care of calves are usually outside, and their work is less hazardous for injuries than cow milking jobs, with more flexibility to allow for breaks as well. The workers shared that it is not uncommon for dairy workers to suffer from injuries caused by cows that kick. Workers are told to be careful in the workplace but don't receive paid leave if they need to take time off for an injury. Workers think they are vulnerable to infectious diseases and other illnesses due to their contact with the cows and exposure to chemicals.

*“A veces no tenemos lonche, a veces tenemos 10-15 minutos comemos con las manos y guantes sucios”. // “Sometimes we don't have lunch, sometimes we have 10-15 minutes and we eat with dirty hands and gloves.”*

*“Los encargados cuidan más a las vacas que a los trabajadores. Porque los trabajadores dicen que pase lo que pase, ahí está la puerta si uno no quiere trabajar, nunca nos animan, nunca nos dicen cuidense con las vacas, nunca hemos escuchado eso”. // “The managers take more care of the cows than the workers. Because the workers say that no matter what happens there's the door if they don't want to work, they never encourage us, they never tell us to be careful with the cows, we have never heard that”.*

## Personal Protective Equipment

Dairy workers were asked if they use PPE at work, and if they are provided PPE by their employers. Responses varied among the workers. Some of the workers with animal feeding jobs indicated that they don't usually receive gloves from their employers to conduct their tasks, and usually have to buy their equipment. Some workers shared that they receive two or three pairs of gloves per shift but cannot request more if they tear during work. Cow milkers shared that they only receive gloves but need to buy the rest of the equipment, such as masks, aprons, boots, and sleeves (*mangas*). One of the participants shared that at his farm, they were recently given goggles and chlorine and were asked to disinfect their hands and boots before entering work because they could bring illnesses to the cows. The supervisor shared that all workers at his farm, regardless of their position, can request unlimited gloves per day.

Workers shared that animal feeders have more opportunities to protect themselves because they are outdoors and can more easily use any PPE they need. But those who are milking cows indoors find it more challenging to use PPE because it's usually very uncomfortable to wear

goggles and masks because they get wet, are difficult to breathe in, and the goggles can fog frequently.

### Handwashing at Work

Workers were asked how easy handwashing is for them while at work. For some, handwashing is easy while working at the farm because they have access to clean water, but for others, it is the opposite. Some mentioned that they often eat a snack or lunch with dirty gloves because they don't have water breaks or time to wash their hands. Others mentioned that the only water they have available at their farm is the water they give to calves, and that is all they use to clean their hands and eat. Some of them don't have access to soap.

*"...A veces agarramos agua ahí que se da a los becerritos y a veces agarramos un poquito y con eso nos limpiamos las manos. Pero yo creo que es desde ahí donde salen las infecciones y donde se afecta a uno y donde sale la enfermedad." // "Sometimes we use water given to the calves and sometimes we clean our hands with that. But I believe that it is from there that infections arise and where one is affected and where the disease arises".*

### Healthcare Access

Workers were asked where they seek medical care, if they look for tests, and if they do, where they look for that type of health service. When workers are sick, they usually continue to show up at work because they don't have sick leave. Most workers mentioned seeking medical care when they are sick is very costly because they are uninsured. Workers reported paying \$30-\$100 for a clinic visit or consultation with a doctor, which was viewed as expensive, in addition to the cost of missing one day's wages at work. They generally go to health centers or hospitals. The supervisor mentioned he has access to health insurance through his employer. At his farm, workers receive health insurance after sixty days of work and only must cover their co-pay when they visit health centers. These workers also receive one paid sick leave day for every forty hours worked and are eligible to use the hours after ninety days of work.

*"Acá con nosotros te hacen muchas preguntas cuando uno pide un permiso... te piden una receta, y esa receta, como decimos que tienes que ir con el doctor para que te den una receta y para esa receta sale muy caro por un dolor de cabeza entonces nosotros mejor nos vamos a trabajar, aunque nos duela la cabeza o tenemos un dolor del cuerpo, nosotros participamos en el trabajo porque nos sale muy caro para pedir un día." // "Here they ask you a lot of questions when you ask for permission [for time off of work]...they ask you for a prescription, and that prescription, you have to go to the doctor so that they'll give you a prescription, and for that prescription it ends up being very expensive for a headache, so we better go to work, even if our head hurts or we have body pain, we do the work because it's too expensive for us to ask for a day off".*

## Recommendations to Disseminate Information on H5N1

Workers were asked about the best methods to educate dairy workers about the avian influenza virus and its prevention and where it would be best to disseminate this information. Workers shared that receiving information over the phone would be good because they are usually tired and don't have time to watch the news on TV. Phone applications like TikTok and Facebook are good ways to disseminate this information. WhatsApp is also a good platform, but workers pointed out that you would need to have phone numbers or be part of a group to disseminate and receive information. One worker shared that her town's health center shares information through their WhatsApp "status."

Dairy workers also think that printed flyers to distribute at work would be ideal and having someone who can read the information to them because there are workers who cannot read. It's better to give information to dairy workers during work hours and tell them specifically what the avian influenza is, what to do, and how to care for themselves. Not everyone has access to social media, so it would be best to give information on the dairy farm. Regarding languages spoken by dairy workers, besides English and Spanish they mentioned knowing large groups of people from Chiapas, Mexico who speak Tsotsil, K'iché from Guatemala, and Nahuatl from Mexico.

## Next Steps

NCFH will continue to work closely with dairy workers to better understand and develop strategies to address PPE usage and education and training about H5N1 prevention and mitigation. NCFH will take the findings from this listening session into consideration while developing educational materials and response efforts in collaboration with CDC partners.