Trump’s Immigration Tactics Obstruct Efforts To Avert Bird Flu Pandemic, Researchers Say

Dairy and poultry workers have accounted for most cases of H5N1 bird flu in the U.S.

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Aggressive deportation tactics have terrorized farmworkers at the center of the nation’s bird flu strategy, public health workers say.

Dairy and poultry workers have accounted for most cases of the bird flu in the U.S. — and preventing and detecting cases among them is key to averting a pandemic. But public health specialists say they’re struggling to reach farmworkers because many are terrified to talk with strangers or to leave home.

“People are very scared to go out, even to get groceries,” said Rosa Yanez, an outreach worker at Strangers No Longer, a Detroit-based Catholic organization that supports immigrants and refugees in Michigan with legal and health problems, including the bird flu. “People are worried about losing their kids, or about their kids losing their parents.”

“I used to tell people about the bird flu, and workers were happy to have that information,” Yanez said. “But now people just want to know their rights.”

Outreach workers who teach farmworkers about the bird flu, provide protective gear, and connect them with tests say they noticed a dramatic shift — first in California, the state hit hardest by the bird flu — after immigration raids beginning on January 7, the day after Congress certified President Donald Trump’s election victory. That’s when Border Patrol agents indiscriminately stopped about 200 Latino farmworkers and day laborers in California’s Central Valley, according to local reports cited in a lawsuit subsequently filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of the United Farm Workers union and several people who were stopped and detained.

“Border Patrol agents went on a fishing expedition” in a three-day raid called “Operation Return to Sender” that “tore families apart and terrorized the community,” the lawsuit alleges.

Among those stopped was Yolanda Aguilera Martinez, a farmworker and grandmother who lives legally in the U.S. and has no criminal record. She was driving at the speed limit on her way to a

doctor's appointment when plainclothes agents in unmarked vehicles pulled her over, ordered her out of the car, pushed her to the ground, and handcuffed her, the lawsuit says. Agents eventually released Aguilera Martinez, but the lawsuit says others who faced deportation were detained for days in "cold, windowless cells" before they were transported to Mexico and abandoned.

They weren't told why they had been arrested, given an opportunity to defend themselves, or allowed to call a lawyer or their families, the lawsuit alleges. It says that the four children of one deported father, who had no criminal record, "have become quiet and scared" and that his epileptic son's "seizures have worsened."

News of the raid spread quickly in California, where an estimated 880,000 mainly Latino farmworkers live. Dairies that employ immigrant labor produce nearly 80% of the U.S. milk supply, according to a 2014 survey.

"After Operation Return to Sender, dairy workers became even less willing to speak about the lack of protection on dairy farms and the lack of sick pay when they're infected — even anonymously," said Antonio De Loera-Brust, a spokesperson for the United Farm Workers.

Outreach workers in other states report a similar chilling effect from raids and immigration policies passed after Trump took office. He repeatedly degraded immigrants and pledged mass deportations on the campaign trail. "They're not humans, they're animals," he said of immigrants illegally in the U.S. last April.

Trump's first legislative action was to sign the Laken Riley Act into law, mandating federal detention for immigrants accused of any crime, regardless of whether they're convicted. On January 20, the Department of Homeland Security rescinded the "protected areas" policy, allowing agents to arrest people who don't have legal status while they're in schools, churches, or hospitals. Last month, the Trump administration deported more than 100 Venezuelans and others without a hearing, ignoring a court order to turn around planes flying the men to El Salvador.

The public health ramifications of farmworkers shrinking from view are potentially massive: Infectious disease scientists say that preventing people from getting bird flu and detecting cases are critical to warding off a bird flu pandemic. That's why the government has funded efforts to protect farmworkers and monitor them for signs of bird flu, like red eyes or flu-like symptoms.

"Every time a worker gets sick, you're rolling the die, so it's in everyone's interest to protect them," De Loera-Brust said. "The virus doesn't care what your immigration papers say."

Pandemic Potential

About 65 dairy and poultry workers have tested positive for the bird flu since March 2024, but the true number of infections is higher. A KFF Health News investigation found that patchy surveillance resulted in cases going undetected on farms last year, and studies have revealed signs of prior infections in farmworkers who hadn't been tested.

State and local health departments were beginning to overcome last year's barriers to bird flu testing, said Salvador Sandoval, a doctor who retired recently from the Merced County health department in California. Now, he said, "people see a mobile testing unit and think it's Border Patrol."

Last year, outreach organizations connected with farmworkers at places where they gathered, like at food distribution events, but those are no longer well attended, Sandoval and others said.

"Regardless of immigration status, people who look like immigrants are feeling a lot of fear right now," said Hunter Knapp, the development director at Project Protect Food Systems Workers, a farmworker advocacy organization in Colorado that does bird flu outreach. He said some Latino community health workers have scaled back their outreach efforts because they worry about being harassed by the authorities or members of the public.

A Latina outreach worker in Michigan, speaking on the condition of anonymity because she's worried about retaliation against her family, said, "Many people don't go to the doctor right now, because of the immigration situation."

"They prefer to stay at home and let the pain or redness in the eye or whatever it is go away," she said. "Things have really intensified this year, and people are very, very scared."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported far fewer human cases since Trump took office. During the three months before January 20, the agency confirmed two dozen cases. Since then, it's detected only three, including two people with cases severe enough to be hospitalized.

The CDC has said it continues to track the bird flu, but Jennifer Nuzzo, director of the Pandemic Center at Brown University, said the slowdown in cases might be due to a lack of testing. "I am concerned that we are seeing a contraction in surveillance and not necessarily a contraction in the spread of the virus."

Undetected infections pose a threat to farmworkers and to the public at large. Because viruses evolve by mutating within bodies, each infection is like a pull of a slot machine lever. A person who died of the bird flu in Louisiana in December illustrates that point: Scientific evidence suggests that bird flu viruses evolved inside the patient, gaining mutations that may make the viruses more capable of spreading between humans. However, because the patient was isolated in a hospital, the more dangerous viruses didn't transmit to others.

That might not happen if sick farmworkers don't receive treatment and live in crowded households or windowless detention centers where they might infect others, said Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. Although the bird flu doesn't yet have the ability to spread easily between people through the air, like the seasonal flu, it might occasionally spread when people are in close quarters — and evolve to do so more efficiently.

"I worry that we might not figure out that this is happening until some people get severely sick,"

Rasmussen said. “At that point, the numbers would be so large it could go off the rails.”

The virus might never evolve to spread easily, but it could. Rasmussen said that outcome would be “catastrophic.” Based on what’s known about human infections, she and her colleagues predict in a new report that an H5N1 bird flu pandemic “would overwhelm healthcare systems” and “cause millions more deaths” than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaccinations Drop Off

Late last year, the CDC rolled out a seasonal flu vaccine campaign targeted at more than 200,000 livestock workers. The hope was that flu vaccinations would lessen the chance of a farmworker being infected by seasonal flu and bird flu viruses simultaneously. Co-infection gives the two flu viruses a chance to swap genes, potentially creating a bird flu virus that spreads as easily as the seasonal variety.

Yet Sandoval said flu vaccine uptake dropped immediately after the January operation in California.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials said in a statement that they arrested 78 immigrants “unlawfully present in the U.S.” during the three-day operation. They included a convicted sex offender and others with criminal histories including vandalism and petty theft, the statement said. The agency did not name allegations against each person and did not say whether all had been charged.

Former officials with the Biden administration, which was in its waning days as the arrests occurred, distanced itself from the operation in interviews with the Los Angeles Times.

Mayra Joachin, an attorney at the ACLU of Southern California, said the operation was unlike others under the Biden administration in that these were indiscriminate arrests by Border Patrol in the interior of the country. “It fits with the Trump administration’s broader campaign of instilling fear in immigrant communities,” she said, “as seen in the election campaign and in subsequent actions attacking anyone perceived to be a noncitizen in the country.”

In March, an assistant chief in the Border Patrol unit that conducted the operation, David Kim, called the operation a “proof of concept.”

“We know we can push beyond that limit now as far as distance goes,” he told the Southern California news outlet Inewsource.

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to requests for comment. In an email, White House spokesperson Kush Desai wrote, “Despite what the ‘experts’ believe, combatting the Avian flu epidemic and enforcing our immigration laws are not mutually exclusive.”

Anna Hill Galendez, a managing attorney at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, which is involved in bird flu outreach, said unusually aggressive tactics by Immigration and Customs

Enforcement agents deterred sick dairy workers in Michigan's Upper Peninsula from leaving their homes for care in late January. They contacted the center for help.

"They wanted medical care. They wanted flu vaccines. They wanted [personal protective equipment]. They wanted to get tested," Hill Galendez said. "But they were afraid to go anywhere because of immigration enforcement."

Lynn Sutfin, a public information officer at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, responded to queries about the situation in the peninsula in an email to KFF Health News, saying, "The farmworkers did not take the local health department and MDHHS up on the testing offer."

The CDC declined to comment on the impact of immigration actions on farmworker outreach.

To adapt to the new reality, Yanez now draws attention to her advice on the bird flu in Michigan by pairing it with information on immigrant rights. Knapp, in Colorado, said his organization is shifting its approach away from bird flu outreach at events where farmworkers congregate, because that could be perceived as a setup — and could inadvertently become one if ICE agents targeted such an event.

Outreach workers who live among farmworkers are withdrawing a little, too. "Being Latinos, we are always identified," said the outreach worker who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "I have a visa that protects me, but things are changing very quickly under the Trump administration, and the truth is, nothing is certain."

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