

Dear Dr. McKelvie

I have spent decades working in Canada and around the world on managing zoonotic disease risks, including High Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). As you know from your own work, in a complex world, one can never achieve zero risk. In fact it is usually counter-productive to attempt to do so; there are too many trade-offs. We don't, for instance, ban walks in the forest to deal with Lyme Disease, or pave over wetlands to prevent malaria, or repeatedly spray pesticides or cull songbirds to prevent West Nile Virus. We educate and manage.

In this context, it has come to my attention that Toronto, after having implemented a successful pilot program on urban chickens, is now thinking about backing away from the success of that program. I understand the risks of HPAI, but in terms of the risks themselves, and public education, this would, I think, be a mistake.

The risks of disease transmission from small backyard flocks to people are no higher (and probably lower) than those from pet dogs, cats, caged birds, pigeons, and urban wildlife. The general scientific consensus is that the most effective approach to managing the risks related to backyard hens and HPAI should be similar to that taken for those other (higher risk) pets.

The global reservoirs for all influenza viruses are waterbirds such as ducks and geese. These thus pose a threat to chickens (not to people) as they migrate through Ontario. People pick up HPAI through close association with sick birds, such as through slaughtering or barn-cleaning. The main risks to commercial flocks are through contact with wild birds and/or glitches in bio-security.

Many of the fears associated with allowing urban poultry are rooted in a post-Covid sense of panic, a response which rarely serves public health well. Current understanding of urban ecology can enable cities to promote well-managed urban flocks, minimizing possible disease risks, and promoting the positive impacts of redirecting household food waste to chickens, proper composting, and adapting to climate change. Carefully managed (flocks under roofs during migration seasons, away from bodies of water, frequent cleaning), these small urban flocks are a wonderful opportunity for education and sharing of information about public health, food safety, zoonotic disease management, and animal welfare.

My great frustration in teaching epidemiology and food safety over the years has been that so few consumers have any realistic notion of local ecology or where their food comes from. Hence these consumers are vulnerable to a variety of charlatans arguing for fantasized zero-risk approaches to health in complex social and biological ecosystems. This results in the destruction of habitats which are essential for pollinators and wild bird populations. Rearing of poultry on a small scale within city limits can begin the process of redressing this profound ignorance.

If we do not make room for these urban entrepreneurs, we risk losing a very important educational opportunity, as well as food-rearing skills that will enable us to better navigate the economic, climatic and environmental instability our society will face in the coming decades. Cities like New York and Vancouver have recognized this; when Toronto approves this, the city will be in good company.

I would hope that these considerations might be raised when a final decision is made, and at the very least put the program on hold until the current migratory season is past.

sincerely

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About me: I am a veterinary epidemiologist and University Professor Emeritus, University of Guelph; founding president of Veterinarians without Borders/ Vétérinaires sans Frontières – Canada; founding member of Communities of Practice for Ecosystem Approaches to Health-Canada. 2010 recipient of inaugural award for contributions to ecosystem approaches to health from the International Association for Ecology and Health; 2019 awarded Covetrus award from the World Small Animal Veterinary Association recognizing “veterinarians who have exhibited exceptional acts of valour and commitment in the face of adversity to service the community.” In 2022 I was appointed as an Officer in Order of Canada, cited “for his leadership and expertise in ecosystem approaches to health, and for supporting development worldwide.”