

IICA IN THE FACE OF THE INFLUENZA OUTBREAK

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Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA)

The appearance of a type-A outbreak of human influenza this April has given rise to grave public health concerns. Our countries, however, are now better prepared to face this phenomenon, thanks to the efforts undertaken over the last few years to prevent transboundary diseases such as Avian Influenza. In this regard, IICA – particularly its Animal Health and Food Safety area – will continue to help member states to strengthen their veterinary services, improve their biosafety systems, and establish good livestock practices.

A matter of public health

Swine flu viruses do not usually attack human beings; they are, however, extremely prone to change. We must begin to call this disease “influenza”, or “type-A (i.e., human) influenza”, rather than “swine flu”, since the latter term only leads to confusion. In fact, no pigs anywhere appear to be afflicted with this disease. The new subtype of the virus has five components: human influenza, avian influenza, and three types of swine influenza (one North American, one Asian, and one European variety). It is an H1N1 type-A influenza virus.

At times such as these, the population should be alerted, but panic should be avoided. Large gatherings should be discouraged; hands should be washed frequently; disposable tissue or toilet paper should be used to cover sneezes or coughs; and contact with sick individuals, or with those displaying cold- or flu-like symptoms, should be avoided. The symptoms of the disease are as follows: fever in excess of 38 degrees, coughing, and sore throat. (For detailed information, please consult the sources listed below).

Impacts of influenza

This type-A influenza outbreak is affecting many different sectors of society:

- **Health:** a world health emergency has been declared.
- **Tourism:** large numbers of people have stopped traveling, and some airlines have actually reported a slump in sales.
- **Social activity:** people have become less mobile, gathering less. Schools and other educational institutions have been closed.
- **The economy:** there has been a significant decline in pork sales. Some countries have closed their borders to meat and meat products, and some gatherings have been cancelled as a precaution.

There has been a considerable drop-off in consumption of pork products in both Mexico and the United States, and some countries have closed their borders to such products. It should be noted that swine influenza is not transmitted via food. Humans can eat pork or pork-related products without contracting the virus. A lack of awareness of this fact can create unnecessary fears and drastically reduce consumption, with negative consequences for countries or regions.

These effects are a reflection of the multi-dimensional nature of influenza; hence, prevention and control are also multi-dimensional (health, agriculture, trade, tourism, etc.).

Our position

As an organization specializing in agriculture, we acknowledge the public health implications of the current outbreak. While the porcine and avian origin of the virus has been noted, transmission among humans is currently under investigation. In this regard, IICA will offer support to the health institutions and authorities currently addressing the emergency. We will also support technical cooperation agencies that have expertise on the issue, in accordance with the guidelines established by our Medium-term Plan, within the limits allowed by our financial, human, and technical capabilities.

We recognize the multi-dimensional impact of influenza; given the ability of IICA to promote inter-institutional and inter-agency dialogue and coordination, we will promote dialogue and coordination between the health, agricultural, and trade sectors through our efforts in each country, as well as the Institute's regional directorates of operations. We will also promote declarations conducive to joint efforts and the pursuit of common objectives at the inter-agency forums of which IICA is a part.

IICA recognizes the importance of state veterinary services. Accordingly, it will continue to support countries in the strengthening of such services, which are the best means to prevent and manage any disease or health emergency. Monitoring of swine farms should also be increased, and biosafety measures and good livestock practices should be applied.

Our role in disseminating the true dimensions of the emergency and raising awareness among consumers regarding the safety of pork may be crucial.

The lessons learned from the avian influenza outbreaks of recent years remind us of the need for countries to strike an appropriate balance between sanitary status, public health, and trade facilitation. To that end, they must base their decisions and actions on the rules established by competent bodies such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Adherence to the rules of official bodies is one of the guiding principles of IICA.

It is essential that every IICA representative meet with his or her staff to analyze the hemispheric and national situation and, above all, to disseminate the institutional recommendations issued to prevent the spread of the disease. These recommendations should also be explained to family members.

Agricultural health and food safety specialists (in every area – hemispheric, regional, and national) should liaise with national authorities, in order to determine which actions are being taken at the national level, and identify areas in which the Institute may be of service.