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California Becomes Hot Spot for Bird Flu Cases in Cows, Sparking Fears

- Disease spreads to more than 170 herds, but few human cases
- Heat has increased cow deaths, worsened symptoms for some



Bird flu has been reported in more than 130 herds in California since late August *Photographer: Noah Berger/AP*

By [Ilena Peng](#)
October 28, 2024 at 9:00 AM EDT

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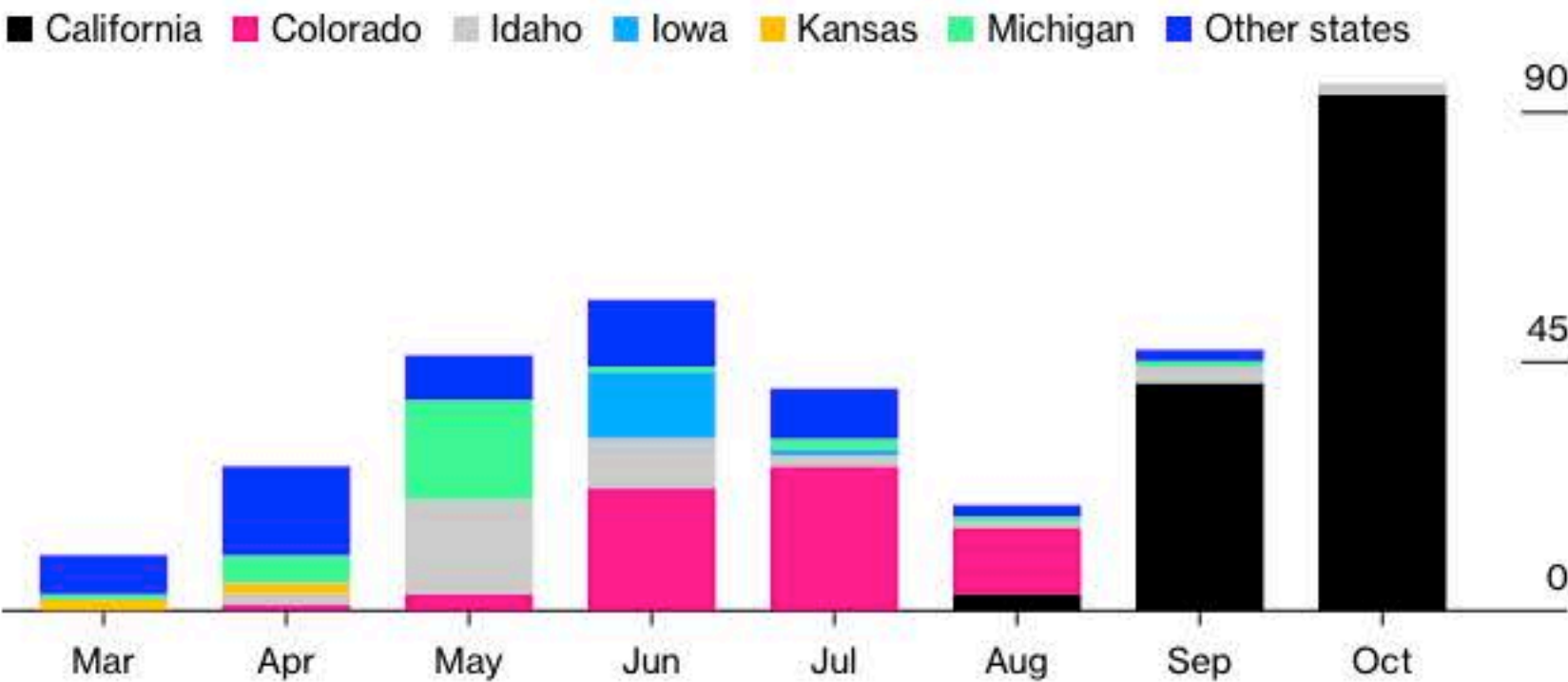
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Dairy farmers in California are grappling with a steadily advancing outbreak of avian flu in their herds - a problem few of them want to talk about publicly, but that none of them can afford to ignore.

Bird flu has been reported in more than 170 herds in California since late August, with the state accounting for nearly half of all US cases detected in dairy cows since the outbreak began in March.

California Becomes Center of Bird Flu Outbreak in Dairy Cows

Number of dairy herds affected by avian influenza by state



Source: US Department of Agriculture
Note: Data as of October 25, 2024. Other states includes Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming

One farmer, who asked not to be named to protect his privacy, said he watched this summer as the outbreak marched toward his farm in Fresno County, in the state's Central Valley region. First, the virus was found at a dairy eight miles to the north. A week later, it surfaced four miles away, and then two miles.

"It wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when it was going to come," said the farmer, who prepared trailers to treat sick animals and braced for the pathogen to arrive. The disease was detected in one of his milk tanks in September.



California produces more milk than any other US state. While the outbreak hasn't yet led to shortages, that could change if the flu continues to spread. What's more, news images of dead animals have spurred worries among farmers that the disease could cause alarm and imperil their livelihoods – and that the industry could be blamed if the bird flu propagates among people.

Read more: [Bird Flu Tests Don't Find Signs of Human-to-Human Spread](#)

Federal health officials have said that the risk to the general public remains low. Fifteen people in California have tested positive after being exposed to sick cows, out of 34 confirmed cases in the US, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

The flu's spread has strained the dairy industry, as farmers pour additional resources into treating sick cows and even cull animals whose milk production never returns to normal. And another delicate problem has arisen: dealing with the carcasses when large numbers of animals die of the disease.

"We were not prepared for the severity of this outbreak in California," said Anja Raudabaugh, the chief executive officer of [Western United Dairies](#), a trade organization representing farms that account for more than three-quarters of the milk produced in California. "The biosecurity measures worked, until they didn't."

Some herds “are really being impacted and others are just getting sniffles,” said Raudabaugh, who said she is “very concerned” about the effects on overall milk production.

Heat Stress

According to anecdotal estimates, 10% to 15% of cattle with symptoms are either euthanized or sent to slaughter because their milk production didn’t rebound after recovering from the illness, said Michael Payne, the director of the California Dairy Quality Assurance Program and a researcher at the University of California Davis.



An October heat wave that pushed temperatures above 100F (38C) in some areas likely exacerbated fevers and dehydration. The Fresno County farmer treated roughly 1,600 of his 4,000 cows with an electrolyte mix similar to Gatorade. Other farms relied on pills to hydrate animals.

More than half the farmer’s cows over six years old needed treatment, compared with about 5% of those that had just produced their first offspring, around two years old. Only 2% of his herd died on the farm and he hasn’t culled any animals, but he expects he will need to in the future.

California’s dairy industry has fared better than other states despite the high case count, the farmer said, because it had the advantage of time to prepare better testing and treatment.

“We’ve learned from the bad experiences of others how best to treat it – not that that’s easy, and I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy,” he said.

Still, the death toll has stretched capacity in other aspects of the business.

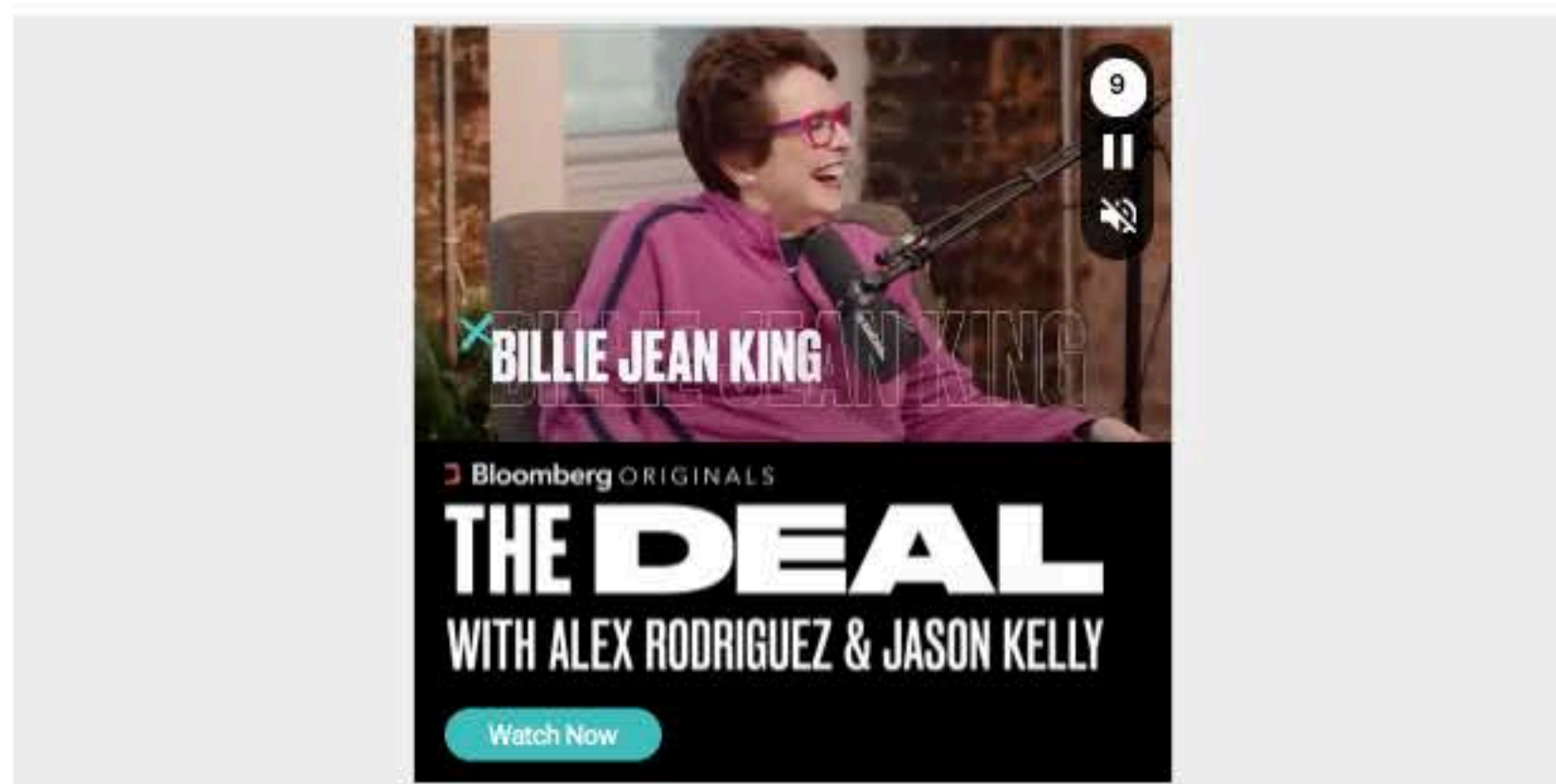
Baker Commodities Inc., a rendering company that converts cow carcasses into products like tallow and leather, is facing higher demand due to the “larger than normal die-off” in the Central Valley, said Jimmy Andreoli II, the company’s assistant vice president of public relations and legislative affairs.

The company has made temporary adjustments on some routes, such as picking up animals every other day instead of daily, “due to the overwhelming volume of fallen animals and the extra time required for sanitization procedures,” according to a statement.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture was aware of one renderer that experienced temporary delays, but rendering companies otherwise have capacity to process deceased dairy cattle, said Steve Lyle, the agency’s director of public affairs.

Still Spreading

The disease could continue to spread among cows for some time. More than 500 herds in California may be infected by early December, according to Nate Donnay, the director of dairy market insight at StoneX Group.



An effective cattle vaccine is “probably the way that we dramatically slow the spread and really keep it from getting a bigger foothold in other parts of the country,” Donnay said. “But in the short term, once it shows up in one of these major dairy areas with large dairy farms, it just seems to spread like wildfire.”

The impact on the milk supply so far has been minimal. California’s production in September was little changed from the prior year, according to the [US Department of Agriculture](#). Output could fall 1% to 3% through November, in line with the effects seen in other states, Donnay said.

For individual dairies, the outbreak could cast a longer shadow. Tyler, a farmer in San Joaquin Valley who asked to be identified by his first name, said about three quarters of his 1,500-cow milking herd fell ill. About 60 cows died, and more might be sent to slaughter if their production never rebounds.

Average milk production per cow dropped 25% in the week after the first emergence of the virus on the farm, and is still 10% lower than normal even though his herd is no longer showing any symptoms, Tyler said. He doesn’t expect to meet his normal production numbers for at least six months, when his herd will be repopulated

with new cows.

“The milk that they produce is just a byproduct of happy, healthy animals,” he said. “I would never have guessed that it would’ve affected us like it did.”

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