



Key Questions and Answers for 2009 Pandemic H1N1 Influenza Scenario 3: USDA Services During Pandemic as of October 9, 2009

Educating the media and the public about the complexities of the 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza virus strain vs. swine influenza as a disease among pigs is one of USDA's primary communications objectives.

As part of this effort, USDA, in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services, has developed four scenarios in the event of a detection and/or outbreak of 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza in the U.S. swine herd and provision of USDA services during the pandemic.

The scenarios are:

- 1) general animal health;
- 2) a detection of 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza in commercial swine;
- 3) USDA services during pandemic; and
- 4) food safety

Each of these scenarios contains a series of key questions and answers about animal health, guidance for the public regarding USDA services during the pandemic, as well as a summary of the actions USDA would take in the event of a 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza detection in U.S. swine.

KEY QUESTIONS

- 3-1 My child eats at school. If the school is closed how will my child get meals?
- 3-2 I do business at the USDA service centers, how can I do it if the office is closed?
- 3-3 How will I drop off my request for payment if the office is closed?
- 3-4 How will USDA provide inspection if inspectors are sick?
- 3-5 Will federally inspected meat plants be shut down if employees are sick, if so how will this impact the food supply?
- 3-6 I have vacation plans, will USDA keep the forests open?
- 3-7 If a processing plant is shut down, how will that impact the movement of animals?
- 3-8 What will you do if all of your firefighters are sick?
- 3-9 How will USDA Forest Service law enforcement officers protect the forests if they're sick?
- 3-10 How can I get my Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) [formerly food stamps] benefits? Will they be affected?
- 3-11 How can I get my WIC benefits?
- 3-12 How will USDA provide its services in foreign countries?
- 3-13 How will USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) collect data from hog and pig producers for surveys such as the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) if there are quarantines and enumerators cannot conduct in-person interviews?
- 3-14 How will NASS gather data for the quarterly hogs and pigs surveys if producers cannot be reached?



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3-1 My child eats at school. If school is dismissed how will my child get meals?

School dismissals can be used as a strategy to slow the spread of the flu.

- While school dismissals will reduce the spread of the flu it also will prevent school meals from being served.

In the event of school dismissal, USDA will reimburse schools and community organizations for meals provided to low income children, but not in large group settings.

- USDA is able to do this through authority provided by the Summer Food Service Program.
- This helps address concerns regarding the loss of school meals for low-income children, many of whom might not have access to other food sources when schools are dismissed.
- States must approve requests to operate the program.
- Schools and other community organizations must work closely together with their state to synchronize and implement plans, including methods of distributing meals.

Low income families with school aged children might be eligible for other nutrition assistance programs in their communities.

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly food stamps, is a resource for low income families to apply for benefits.
- Local food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens offer additional ways to receive nutrition assistance.

3-2 I do business at the USDA Service Centers; how can I do it if the office is closed?

In the event USDA Service Centers are closed, actions to continue providing services will be taken, to the extent possible.

- Essential customer related services such as making and receiving payments will continue with reduced staff and operations.
- Service Centers that are closed could relocate their operations to adjoining Service Centers and continue operations there until the emergency has ceased.
- Through lockbox services the mail and check payments that are regularly received can be obtained picked-up at lockbox location and moved to alternative Service Centers.
- Survey and design work of conservation practices, field mapping for soil surveys, and snow survey site maintenance might continue unless known cases of 2009 pandemic H1N1 influenza prevent employees from entering a farm or other site.
- Guidance has been given to employees detailing precautions that can be taken and the flexibilities available to continue providing services.
- Telephone recordings, web site postings, media and public service announcements and signs at office locations will be used to convey the status of offices and service availability.



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USDA Service Centers are working to provide alternative methods to apply for programs or make repayments.

- Arrangements are being made to conduct business via phone, fax, and internet.
- Some program requirements that normally require in-person contact will be relaxed to accommodate customers using alternative methods if the office is closed due to employee illness.

USDA Service Centers will ensure customers are aware of essential services that have extended deadlines to accommodate program participation.

- USDA Service Center Agencies will make efforts to locally publicize extended program signup deadlines if the office is closed due to employee illnesses.
- Telephone recordings, web site postings, media and public service announcements and signs at office locations will be used to convey the status of offices and service availability.
- Using a suite of techniques will ensure the information is broadcast to the greatest extent possible.

USDA will notify and coordinate with other USDA and federal agencies, state and local governments and partners.

- Coordination at the USDA agency level is important to convey a united front for consistency and equity among USDA employees and customers.
- Coordination with partners and other organizations will ensure information and some assistance is provided to customers in the event of office closures.
- If the Centralized Servicing Center (CSC) is not on-line, Rural Development Housing customers can get their questions answered through their Rural Development local field or State Office.

3-3 How will I drop off my request for payment if the office is closed?

USDA Service Centers are working to provide alternative methods to apply for programs or make repayments.

- For Multi-Family Housing most payments are either preauthorized debits or are sent to an off site lockbox.
- For Rural Development (RD) Single Family Housing, there are several options for payment processing:
 1. The CSC has established contracts and Memorandums of Understanding to allow for the collection and processing of scheduled payments. The majority of the RD customers mail their payments to an established lockbox bank whereby a payment file is generated and fed into our mortgage servicing system – both of which are off site.
 2. RD customers also enjoy payment flexibility including an automated Pre-authorized Debit (PAD) whereby the system automatically debits a customer's bank account on the due date of his/her payment.



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3. RD customers also may initiate their own payments by employing the use of MoneyGram, Western Union and the Customer Initiated Payment option via the Internet or phone to electronically transfer funds.

4. To ensure all payments remitted by the borrower were received, CSC has the ability to perform portfolio balancing off site, if necessary.

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- USDA Service Center Agencies will make efforts to locally publicize extended program signup deadlines if the office is closed due to employee illnesses.
- Telephone recordings, web site postings, media and public service announcements and signs at office locations will be used to convey the status of offices, alternative site locations and service availability.
- Using a suite of techniques will ensure the information is broadcast to the greatest extent possible.

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3-4 How will USDA provide inspection if inspectors are sick?

USDA is identifying personnel to provide inspection in the event that Food Safety and Inspection Service personnel are unavailable.

- USDA plans to deploy supervisory and non-line personnel to line positions as needed to deliver essential inspection functions at plants.
- USDA also is training replacement personnel to further ensure delivery of essential inspection functions during a pandemic.
- Basic skills, education, and experience are pre-requisites for the training.

USDA is exploring emergency regulatory flexibilities.

- These will not impact public health protections.
- And will ensure the delivery of USDA's essential functions.
- It also will ensure the continued safety of the food supply.

USDA is expanding the proposed database of deployable personnel.

- The database includes Food Safety and Inspection Service personnel as well as those from other USDA agencies.



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- It also contains names and contact information of retired USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service personnel.
- This expansion will ensure that USDA has the available personnel staffing resources during a human pandemic.

3-5 Will federally inspected meat plants be shut down if employees are sick? If so, how will this impact the food supply?

No. To ensure public health protection, USDA will implement the deployment strategy that was developed in collaboration with industry.

- All available field inspection personnel, including cross-utilized personnel, will help ensure the safety of food and that inspection activities meet statutory requirements.
- Additional USDA Office of International Affairs personnel will be deployed to import facilities to handle any shipments diverted from affected ports.
- USDA will assess the initial deployment and make “real-time adjustments” where needed.

USDA has executed emergency regulatory flexibilities.

- The regulatory requirements were identified and deemed amenable to emergency flexibilities.
- To ensure maximum inspection services to the regulated industry.
- To maintain statutory requirements for the marks of inspection and to ensure public health protection.

USDA communication mechanisms will provide up-to-date information.

- Multiple tactics will ensure communication with various parties, including: regulated industry, employees, general public, and other stakeholders.
- Information will be available by calling the USDA meat and poultry hotline at 1-888-MPHOTLINE or through Ask Karen on the Web at www.fsis.usda.gov/ask_karen.

3-6 I have vacation plans, will USDA keep the forests open?

Each forest supervisor has discretion to keep a forest open during a crisis.

- Call the National Forest or check the USDA Forest Service Website to find out – www.fs.fed.us.

3-7 If a processing plant is shut down, how will that impact the movement of animals?

Live animals and birds might have to be diverted to non-pandemic affected areas.

- If a processing plant is unable to operate to produce safe food in compliance with statutory requirements, live animals/birds could be diverted for slaughter and processing by the industry to establishments located in non-pandemic areas.



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3-8 What will you do if all of your firefighters are sick?

The Forest Service has a pandemic influenza plan for the federal wildland fire agencies.

- Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management maintains mutual aid and assistance agreements with local and State governments.
- Through the State Forester in each State, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Defense, resources will be provided when Forest Service personnel are not available.
- The plan is on the Web at: <http://www.nifc.gov/>

The normal course of the wildland fire season is to abate as we enter the autumn season.

- During autumn the days become shorter, temperatures begin to drop and relative humidity begins to increase.
- This change in the weather reduces the threat of wildfire.
- As we enter the winter months wildfire threats decrease while the influenza season is beginning to increase.

3-9 How will USDA Forest Service law enforcement officers protect the forests if they're sick?

Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations maintains cooperative law enforcement agreements with local and state police organizations.

- These agreements will help the Forest Service perform its law enforcement duties when Forest Service officers are unavailable, or to supplement during higher visitation times, and/or other emergencies
- If an officer is sick, the officer should protect themselves and the public from exposure and/or further risk of exposure by utilizing sick leave and staying home until medically able to return to full duties.
- If a major outbreak occurred and an area was declared a national emergency/disaster, supplemental officers could be requested through FEMA to Emergency Services Function-13 (Public Safety).

3-10 How can I get my Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) [formerly food stamps] benefits? Will they be affected?

USDA does not expect SNAP application or distribution processes to be affected.

States agencies have various systems in place to facilitate remote application and distribution of SNAP benefits.

- For households already participating in SNAP, benefits will continue to be electronically transferred to their EBT cards as usual.
- For new applicants who are not able to leave their homes, States have systems in place for remote applications.
- Every State has a website with information about how to apply for SNAP.



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- Most States have applications available online in printable format that can be completed and mailed to the nearest local office.
- Interviews can take place by phone.

Information about the SNAP program is available.

- Nearly every State has a toll free information number that people can call to request a hard copy application by mail or find out more information about the Program.
- People can call the SNAP toll-free information number at 1-800-221-5689 for updated information, a connection to their State information number or to request information by mail.

3-11 How can I get my WIC benefits?

WIC benefits will still be available and not impacted by the pandemic.

- Up to a 3-month supply of WIC benefits can be mailed to persons who are not scheduled for nutrition education or a certification visit.
- WIC participants can designate a proxy to pick up or transact their WIC benefits.

3-12 How will USDA provide its services in foreign countries?

USDA officials based at United States Embassies will adhere to guidance from national health authorities and their respective Embassy's pandemic influenza officer to determine the appropriate level of services in that country during the pandemic.

- USDA has two foreign service agencies- the Foreign Agricultural Service and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service – with officials based at American Embassies throughout the world.
- USDA offices overseas will facilitate contact between U.S. regulatory agencies and animal health officials in countries that export meat and meat products to the United States to ensure that all product exported to the United States meets U.S. food safety requirements.
- USDA will take all actions necessary to ensure that imports of meat and meat products continue to meet U.S. federal requirements.
- USDA is working closely with Department of State to sustain all of USDA's Embassy-based operations. Decisions are being made on a country-by-country basis.
- USDA and Department of State will maintain communication with the international diplomatic community in the United States about any change in the status of USDA's international services in response to the pandemic.

3-13 How will USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) collect data from hog and pig producers for surveys such as the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) if there are quarantines and enumerators cannot conduct in-person interviews?

- Each NASS field office has a pandemic plan in place in the event of an H1N1 outbreak which would prevent enumerators from conducting in-person interviews for any major NASS surveys.
- Back-up field offices have also been identified in the event that a full social distancing becomes an issue.



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- Data collection would occur by telephone until personal visits could resume.

3-13 How will NASS gather data for the quarterly hogs and pigs surveys if producers cannot be reached?

- NASS will make every attempt to collect data for the quarterly hogs and pigs surveys through the Internet (online survey response system), mail or over the telephone.
- NASS enumerators will not make personal visits to farms and ranchers to conduct surveys during a pandemic.