



Immunize Weekly Summary: July 23, 2026

- Extension Collaborative on Immunization Teaching & Engagement (EXCITE): Strengthening Health and Communities through Immunization Supplemental Messaging and Resources
- Announcements

EXCITE: Strengthening Health and Communities through Immunization Supplemental Messaging and Resources – Tina Horn, Livestock and Forage Agent/State Dairy Program Coordinator, Clemson University & EXCITE H5N1 Dairy Specialist; and Jacqueline Wilkins, PhD, Professor, The Ohio State University; OSU Extension Associate Director, EXCITE

Tina Horn and Jacqueline Wilkins, PhD, explained how the EXCITE program is increasing knowledge, awareness, and preparedness around infectious diseases and vaccines.

[VIEW SLIDES](#)

EXCITE is an interagency agreement between the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) National Institute of Food and Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Extension Foundation to increase vaccine confidence and access among rural populations. Now in its sixth year, EXCITE has evolved from a targeted COVID-19 intervention into a comprehensive, sustainable model for public health decision-making that is reaching new audiences through strategic partnerships and integration.

In response to the unprecedented jump of H5N1 (avian) influenza to cows in March 2024, EXCITE mobilized to increase knowledge and application of biosecurity and prevention of transmission among dairy farmers and their workers. It uses trusted messengers to reach various audiences, expanding over time to connect with livestock agents, health care workers, and 4H leaders, for example. Among the key messages is the importance of preventing the potential combination of H5N1 virus with influenza viruses that commonly affect humans. In addition to protecting human and animal health, EXCITE aims to keep the industry's well-being in mind by addressing misconceptions about product safety.

EXCITE engaged researchers to pinpoint the cognitive barriers that keep the target audience from adopting the best available evidence to prevent disease spread. That effort led EXCITE staff to translate CDC information into more user-friendly, digestible, visually appealing

products, such as fact sheets, brochures, postcards, and social media content that use infographics, clean design, and short text that people can grasp and process quickly. For example, the personal protective equipment (PPE) protection pyramid visually depicts PPE needed according to the level of risk. Products are available [online](#) in English and Spanish. EXCITE aims to foster a cycle of evidence translation that takes a One Health¹ approach by promoting application of evidence-based practices on farms and in production facilities and supporting human protections, gathering data along the way to inform the next round of evidence. From pilot studies, EXCITE learned that H5N1 education was successful when incorporated into broader narratives about farm safety, heat stress, and biosecurity, for example. EXCITE has also developed H5N1 [materials](#) specifically aimed at organizers, participants, and patrons of county fairs and livestock shows.

To sustain immunization education efforts, EXCITE is hiring more staff across the country to integrate adult immunization education into other extension programs and curricula, such as USDA's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), diabetes prevention programs, and community health worker training. Information is available [online](#) in English and Spanish, and is free to download, print, and distribute. The EXCITE leadership welcomes feedback on products and approaches.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: What is the recommendation for people who keep bird feeders in states such as Ohio, where there is [H5N1] transmission?

Tina Horn (EXCITE): If you've got songbirds or migratory birds that come in and steal from your bird feeder, just watch. If you start seeing some dead birds, that might be something to be alarmed about. We don't see them a lot in South Carolina in our local [bird population]. It's mostly in those migratory birds, and with those, just when those flight patterns are active. But I wouldn't be concerned about the songbirds and the bird feeders. If you start seeing some dead birds, then maybe pick one of those up—not with your hand, but with a glove. I just take a gallon bag and put my hand in it and grab the bird. Then just take it to your local or state veterinarian, and they'll check it. They are requesting [for] any abnormal deaths in birds—that they are notified.

Jackie Wilkins (EXCITE): I know it's so hard, this question's so hard because everybody loves birds and birdwatching and feeding birds, but we also know that disease can be transferred between birds and also other animals that get into your bird feeders. So just being cognizant of that. And we're not the bird experts, so we want to be very clear that we're not giving legal bird advice right now. We would be happy to follow up with some additional information about what we know for that. I would also say, you know, be very cognizant about where you clean your bird feeders. Like, don't be bringing them inside and cleaning them in your kitchen sink, right? And so, just, you know, be thoughtful about cross-contamination, biosecurity, and we'd be happy to send you some more information.

¹ “One Health is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach—working at the local, regional, national, and global levels—with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes recognizing the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment.” Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/one-health/about/index.html>

Q: You didn't show very much in the way of poultry outbreaks. Is there a disconnect there, or do you think that's just that the biosecurity with poultry is perhaps a bit easier because they're inside, and you're just not seeing that, and it's really just the wild bird transmission that's the source?

Tina Horn (EXCITE): It just kind of ebbs and flows. Up until, I'd say, 60 days ago, we were down to maybe one or two cases in dairy a month, and poultry numbers were up. There's just kind of an ebb and a flow, and a lot of our poultry numbers go up in the spring, early spring, or in the late fall, or fall, when birds are starting to migrate. We do see more of an increase or an uptick then, it appears to be always in poultry. H5N1 and the bird flu is just something that the poultry industry is just constantly fighting. So I think right now, what you're seeing in the numbers is just probably more unusual than usual to have it be more dairy than poultry.

Jackie Wilkins (EXCITE): I would also say that it's not necessarily perceived in their best interest for producers and others to report, right? They get concerned about whether or not individuals are going to want to buy their products and do business with their operations if they've been identified as a group that's had an interface with that. So we do know that there's, I would say, probably dramatic underreporting in many cases. But as Tina said, we have cycles. I know, for instance, with poultry—Tina, how many years ago was it? We had to shut down all of the exhibits at our fairs in Ohio and other states because there was such a huge number of birds affected. That's part of the problem with this. If it's not happening in the moment, a lot of times people take their foot off the gas, and then we find ourselves back in trouble when they haven't paid attention. And obviously, measles is another area of consideration for that as well.

Tina Horn (EXCITE): Now, we don't want folks to leave thinking that there's a lot of [underreporting in] commercial milk production. The dairies in each state have monthly mandatory testing. So where we're probably seeing the difference is more with the poultry, because a lot of these backyard growers maybe know that avian flu is out there, and if they have a dead bird or two—maybe we haven't gotten to them yet, or it may be [that they] don't want to be the one in the area to start the ball rolling. Because when you get avian flu in birds, in commercial poultry, and in backyard flocks, right now, it requires a depopulation. In dairies, they can get by. [Cows] get sick, kind of like the flu. Some of them, if it's an older cow, get a very severe case of the flu. If it's a younger cow, those symptoms are a little less. As well as, depending on the heat—during July and August, those cases of H5N1 in cattle are way more severe, because they don't want to drink, and they don't want to eat, and it's hot, and they get dehydrated. There are way more dire results from the H5N1 or bird flu in poultry, so I think some of those poultry cases are probably in the backyard. Birds are getting swept under the rug. If it happens in a commercial setting, you're going to know it, because those birds are in those houses, and it's going to go through [fast].

Jackie Wilkins (EXCITE): Tina, thank you for that. I did not want to suggest that there wasn't surveillance or regulation or reporting. That's also very important.

Q: What are extension programs seeing on the ground with regards to vaccine hesitancy or confidence? It seems like many people do not want to talk about COVID vaccine, but they're more receptive to other vaccines. What kinds of patterns are you seeing in dairy workers: what kind of access do they have, and what are you seeing in terms of hesitancy?

Tina Horn (EXCITE): I think something really interesting was our partnership that we had through the funded states. One of those was in California, focusing on vaccines and vaccine hesitancy, and it just so happened that all of this happened about the time that there was a change in politics that caused a lot of these workers to be fearful of anything, whether it be leaving the farm or showing up somewhere to get vaccines. So I think some of it is vaccine hesitancy with the flu. Right now, we're trying to, you know, encourage farm workers to get the flu shot so that we don't have a combination of the flu and H5N1 and have bigger issues and a greater impact on human health than we already have. But I think a lot of the vaccine hesitancy was 50% hesitancy of just going anywhere in large groups. That is what our [principal investigator] from California found. ... A National Center for Farmworker Health survey found that the majority of farmworkers are Hispanic. That's one of the reasons that we make sure that all of our information goes out in Spanish. There are not as many resources as there are in English.

Jackie Wilkins (EXCITE): One issue was access. Some of it also was not wanting to miss work or take a day off to go get a vaccination, or, as Tina mentioned, go out in public in some instances in some states. And so, a lot of our success was in having producers that were willing to bring on-site vaccinations to their own facilities. There's been real success with that. And then, understanding the messages that resonate with specific audiences was very important. So, you know, protecting the herd is one thing, that care for animals, but also protecting your colleagues and your loved ones. And we've also been working with producers to help them think about what the economic implications are if something was to be shut down for a little while.

Then, in the general population, COVID [is a concern], for sure, but also, there have been some hesitations, because a lot of people are concerned about whether or not mRNA affects your DNA or will you get more sick or, "Every time I get the flu shot, I get the flu,"—those kind of things. So, our work with individuals has been by integrating a lot of this into a general conversation in these curricula. There have been more questions asked, and when there are more questions asked, there's less fear of others feeling like they can ask the same questions. Through this process, at least through the way that we're working with it, we're seeing a lot more receptiveness to the conversations, and many people just having questions, as opposed to being totally opposed to it. We've really got to be able to talk about it—not be an academic wonk, and start throwing the data out in a way that's like, "Haven't you read the meta-analysis on whatever?" But helping them really answer some of those basic questions in ways that are non-controversial. There are definitely areas where different vaccinations are seeing less uptake in communities, and I would encourage you—I wish I had the tool in front of me, maybe somebody here knows it, but you can look it up as to where it is in your city, in your county, in your state, and you can see the differences in vaccine uptake over the last 5 to 10 years, and there definitely are ramifications for some of that. Does that mean we can't reverse it? I don't think so.

We've got a lot of good [resources]—with our EFNEP program, for instance, we have some quick talking points that we do across four sessions out of their six to eight sessions, and we are seeing, with a retrospective evaluation, a 40% understanding of the importance of these vaccines and immunization [increased] up to 90% by the time that they leave, and with most of them indicating that within the next month, they would be either getting a vaccination or talking to their provider, which is a lot of what we talked to them about. If you don't feel comfortable about this, we just encourage people to talk to their provider about it.

Announcements

- The meeting schedule for this summer is as follows:
 - August 13: Redeveloping Trust with Younger Generations – Unity Consortium; Association of Immunization Managers (AIM) Presentation on Systems and Steps for New Vaccine Implementation
 - August 27: Influenza Vaccine Manufacturer Updates
 - September 9: CDC Respiratory Virus and Epidemiology Surveillance Updates
- NAIIS Workgroups have resumed regular meetings. Email info@izsummitpartners.org to be added to meeting invites and email threads.
 - Billing and Coding: Meets on the third Monday of the month at 1 pm ET
 - Operationalizing Adult Immunization: Meets on the second Wednesday of the month at 1 pm ET
 - Sustaining Community-Based Organizations: Meets on the first Wednesday of the month at 1 pm ET
 - A survey went out recently to determine the meeting schedule for the new Workplace Workgroup.
- Summit partners are invited to submit events and information for a public resource, the Summit Resource Calendar (via email to info@izsummitpartners.org). Examples include time-bound information such as back-to-school events, fall vaccine news, and seasonal activities.