Sandy May Affect New England Poultry Production

MISSISSIPPI STATE (Newswise) — Instead of an early snowfall this time of year, farmers along the eastern seaboard are dealing with flood waters and wind damage from Hurricane Sandy, which is expected to affect everything from poultry production to grocery prices.

In Maryland and Delaware, states ranked in the top 15 in young meat chicken production, the storm's aftermath could cause a domino effect, with power outages, transportation disruptions, and a potential lack of feed having a life-threatening result on poultry flocks.

With Mississippi among the top five states in poultry production, professors such as Mary Beck, poultry science department head at Mississippi State University, are no strangers to how storms can influence the poultry market.

"Loss of power could affect the environment in chicken houses that could increase or decrease temperatures. Most poultry operations, however, should have back-up generators," Beck said. "Producers also are trying to make sure they have enough feed on hand to outlast the effects of the storm, in case hauling becomes an issue."

Beck said poultry farmers also may have sped up production to decrease birds in houses and provide more product in stores for consumers who need to increase their food supplies in the storm's wake.

"Having product on the shelves could affect pricing due to increased demand, and if the trucking industry is unable to make deliveries, there could be difficulties with supply," she said.

Transportation also becomes an issue if and when fuel deliveries to farmers are impacted.
Tob Tabler, MSU Extension poultry specialist and professor, "If generators run out of fuel, then providing feed and water to flocks becomes a major issue. If there are power outages and no fuel for generators, environmental conditions – temperature, ventilation, lighting – are a big concern," said.

The milder temperatures of fall see farmers with lower fuel and electricity inputs, and this can mean better bird performance for the season.

Beck said, "Temperatures are not severe right now, so under normal circumstances fall is a good time to raise poultry. Very young birds tolerate heat better and older ones tolerate cold better, for short periods of time."

While final numbers on any losses to the poultry industry could be weeks away,

MSU agricultural economists who have witnessed the impact of hurricanes on the Magnolia State say the storm's impact on food pricing shouldn't be felt in the long term in the urban region where Sandy came ashore.

John Michael Riley, an MSU Extension specialist and professor, said he sees this storm's aftermath having "short term shock" on New Englanders.

"Since these are not big agriculture production states such as Missouri or Kentucky, I see this as a short term consumption concern mainly involving restaurants and grocery stores," he said.

Keith Coble, MSU Giles Distinguished Professor in Agricultural Economics, agreed. "There will definitely be short term disruptions, potential for price gouging, and more. But, I do predict things will get re-established very quickly," he said.

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