

April 24, 2023

Dear Economic and Community Development Committee

Re: EC3.4 - Follow Up Report on the UrbanHensTO Backyard Hens Pilot Program
Keeping Chickens in Backyards in Toronto

I am a **Canadian Infectious Diseases Specialist** and Clinical Assistant Professor of Medicine, based in Vancouver, at the Vancouver General Hospital and the University of British Columbia.

I am concerned about the risk of future outbreaks and pandemics. In 2003, I worked in Toronto during the SARS outbreak; in 2014, I worked in Guinea and Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak; in 2009, I worked in Newfoundland during the H1N1 "swine flu" pandemic; most recently I have worked on the COVID ward at Vancouver General Hospital.

This COVID-19 pandemic, and the previous the previous H1N1 pandemic in 2009 have demonstrated that our interactions with animals can have massive health, economic, and social impacts globally.

It is **well established** that **backyard chickens present an important interface** where pathogens, especially influenza, can **spill over** into chickens from wild birds, or vice versa, and even into people.

This is a serious risk that would be increased by introducing more chickens into the backyards of people living in an urban environment. Given the potential for extensive interactions with people and exposures to migrating birds, chickens kept in backyards are considered particularly high-risk for influenza spillovers.

On an individual level, people owning and interacting with backyard chickens **Salmonella** is a serious risk, especially to very young children or persons with immunocompromise. This risk has been recently highlighted by the **US CDC** following investigation of a nationwide salmonella outbreak linked to backyard chickens that has caused illness in over a thousand people and the death of at least two people.

On a community or population level, the risks associated with **avian influenza** are particularly concerning. The emergence of new strains of avian influenza related to backyard poultry farms can spillover into commercial poultry operations and disrupt international trade and acquire mutations allowing it to be transmitted to people and risk future pandemics.

As the backyard chicken industry is growing, pathogen spillover events between backyard chickens and wild birds and people are becoming more commonly reported.

In light of the catastrophic impact of H5N1 on wild bird populations globally (highlighted in a recent article in the NY Times (April 23, 2023: “Why Dead Birds Are Falling From the Sky, David Quammen) and the grave, and relatively unpredictable, risks for future human pandemics, these risks need to be taken seriously.

Pandemic risks are largely a numbers game, and the more animal-human interactions, the greater the risk. In light of these risks, governmental organizations have recommended (and mandated in some cases of larger farms) that chickens be kept indoors, restricting interactions with people and wild birds.¹

There may be personal enjoyment for people from keeping chickens in their backyard as pets or for personal egg production. However, there are serious risks to the broader community and public health.

It is **easier to prevent** the introduction of backyard chicken farms than to start to close them at a later date. It is easier to prevent a pandemic, than to manage a pandemic and attempt to stop it once started.

The recent movie “Don’t Look Up” called attention to our downplaying of global warming and climate change. Similarly, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and an increasing number of human cases of illness related to **avian influenza**, the risks of future infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics related to our uses of animals are often downplayed.

It is well established that backyard chickens constitute a risk for spillover events to commercial poultry, wildlife and people. We should take these risks seriously, prioritize public health and our natural environment and reduce unnecessary risks such as more backyard chicken farms, especially in crowded urban environments.

Alternatives like **promoting backyard gardens** present much safer and environmentally friendly approaches to connecting with our food and natural world.

It is my strong recommendation as an infectious diseases specialist to not renew pilot projects or approve keeping chickens in people’s backyards in the City of Toronto.

Sincerely,



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¹ <https://www.agcanada.com/daily/b-c-orders-poultry-indoors-as-avian-flu-arrives>
<https://www.agcanada.com/daily/ontario-bans-birds-at-events-as-avian-flu-spreads>