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Managing bird flu and controlling disease

Carl Maniglia, an Animal and Plant Health Agency staff member talks about managing the avian influenza as well as his parallel life as a garden photographer.

Active PCS member Carl Maniglia is among many Animal and Plant Health Agency staff who have been “knocking themselves out” to manage the avian influenza outbreak since 2021. An APHA veteran, he’s worked on every animal disease outbreak since classical swine fever then foot and mouth hit in 2000 and 2001. In his parallel life as a garden photographer, he can often be found outside capturing the dawn light before starting the day job.

Tell us about your job

Since the start of this avian influenza outbreak, until recently, I’ve been responsible for licensing. When we get a case, zones are created around it at 3km and 10km. The 3km one is the most tightly managed. We check every property within 10km and log every bird – whether it’s Auntie Betty’s pet parakeet or a site with 500,000 chickens.

Anyone that wants to move birds within, or between, zones must be licensed by us, by providing evidence that it’s safe. We also ensure new chicks can be moved and are not destroyed unnecessarily.

The point is to keep the wheels turning. That’s been worth billions of pounds and keeps our exports industry going. Every day people get on flights to the US without realising there are probably thousands of day-old chicks in the hold.

Has your job changed now?

During this outbreak we realised the licensing system was too manual. I worked on automating it. We rolled out the first new online version within 12 weeks and I’ve just signed off the project.

So, I've now moved on to the next phase – looking at expanding its capability to be able to cope with other diseases that may potentially be around the corner.

What are the positive aspects?

Knowing we're doing a damn good job. I work with people who are totally dedicated to what they do. Ultimately, they're looking to make sure we can keep the industry on its feet; that people have got food on the table. Another big thing is ensuring we're sensitive to the people on the receiving end of this. Even if you're a tough commercial breeder, it's upsetting to see your stock being destroyed. We have done a lot to minimise the impact of that.

Have people paid attention to this outbreak?

It hasn't really touched the general public enough for it to become more than an occasional local issue. In reality, it has been a national problem for some time.

What has annoyed colleagues is the way some people and politicians have been talking about 'lazy civil servants' with their feet up at home. It's really galling, because all I see is that everybody has been absolutely knocking themselves out for a couple of years.

The question came up recently of how we've managed, given the intensity of the work, and my comment was that we have burned through a lot of adrenaline.

The King has taken an interest in this issue. In April I was asked to join a group that went to have a conversation with him about our work on the outbreak licensing.

Where does the garden photography fit in?

I was in the army and when I left, I trained in journalism and worked in newspapers as a photographer. But freelancing became a struggle and in 1997 I took a temporary contract at what was then the State Veterinary Service. I just kept being offered interesting jobs and staying on

Keeping food on the table longer. I picked up the camera again and did a RHS course in garden photography. Since 2005 I've been doing it as a second, part-time profession.

Both jobs have some flexibility. When you're photographing gardens, especially in the summer, you tend to be there at 5am. You're done by 7am and can get back in time to start work.