

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Egg Prices Are High. They Will Likely Go Higher.

Avian influenza has led to a shortage of eggs and wholesale prices that are through the roof. Consumers can expect to feel the pain for a while.

Source: Julie Creswell, *New York Times*, January 24, 2025

On a trip to a Walmart in Ozark, Mo., in early January, Laura Modrell was surprised to see shoppers “standing around and gasping” in the grocery’s dairy section. As she got closer, she saw that the shelves, where there would normally be stacks of egg cartons, were nearly empty.

“All of the normal-size cartons of eggs were practically gone,” Ms. Modrell said. “I heard some elderly people being really upset.” Across the country, shoppers in grocery stores are facing empty shelves and higher prices for what has traditionally been an inexpensive source of protein: eggs.

And it’s likely to get worse.

Volatile egg prices have been a part of the grocery shopping experience partly because of inflation, but also because of an avian influenza, or bird flu, that made its way to the United States in 2022. That influenza, caused by the H5N1 virus, has infected or killed 136 million birds thus far.

But the outbreak has recently intensified. More than 30 million chickens — roughly 10 percent of the nation’s egg-laying population — have been killed in just the last three months, to prevent the spread of the disease. It could take months before the supply of egg-laying chickens returns to the normal level of around 318 million, roughly the equivalent of one chicken per person.

“This is the most devastating wave of the bird flu outbreak we’ve seen since it began to spread three years ago,” said Karyn Rispoli, the egg managing editor at Expana, a firm that collects and tracks the price of eggs. “And this time around farms that cater to the retail sector have been disproportionately impacted and that is leaving a big, gaping hole.”

The steep drop in the number of egg-laying chickens has caused a sharp spike in wholesale egg prices. Grocery stores and restaurants are now paying around \$7 for a dozen eggs — a record level, up from \$2.25 last fall, according to Expana. While customers have noticed higher egg prices — the cost of eggs for consumers is 37 percent higher than a year ago — they have not yet felt the full impact of the shortage. Grocery stores typically price products like milk and eggs as “loss leaders,” meaning they are sold for less than the wholesale price that stores pay, to entice customers into a store.

Karen Meleta, a spokeswoman for Wakefern, a retailer-owned supermarket cooperative whose stores include ShopRite and Gourmet Garage, said in an emailed statement that the grocer has tried to maintain prices on eggs, but that it’s a “difficult thing to balance, particularly given the volatility of the market and the uncertainty resulting from these continued outbreaks.”

Around the country, shoppers are finding empty shelves or limits placed on the number of cartons they can purchase. That can create panic and lead to shoppers stockpiling eggs out of fear that they may not be able to find any later. Before Thanksgiving, Sarah Joy Hays, the owner of Counterspace, a bakery in Baton Rouge, La., was paying less than \$2 for a dozen eggs, which she needs for chocolate chip cookies, quiche and other items, she said. But then prices began to climb sharply. After her distributor quoted a price of \$7.86 for a dozen eggs, she hopped in her car and drove to a nearby Sam’s Club, where she purchased eggs for \$3.86 a dozen.

“I’m limited at Sam’s Club with how many cases of eggs I can buy, so I have to make multiple trips,” said Ms. Hays. “But it feels like a steal of a deal at this point, so I’ll do it.”

During the presidential campaign, Donald J. Trump blamed the Biden administration for inflation and promised to bring down prices for consumers. The spread of bird flu will make that pledge more difficult. This week, United Egg Producers, the lobbying arm for egg producers, urged Congress and the new Trump administration to move quickly to form a national strategy to battle the bird flu, including more funding for faster testing at state and federal levels and development of potential vaccines.

At her confirmation hearing on Thursday, Brooke Rollins, who is President Trump's nominee for secretary of agriculture, told senators that among her top priorities was to "immediately and comprehensively get a handle on animal disease outbreaks," though she did not provide details.

For egg producing farms, help with finding a solution to the virus can't come soon enough. Tracy and Jason Ramsdell, who have chicken operations in rural South Dakota and California, have had bird flu outbreaks, most recently in December, which resulted in the loss of 40,000 pasture-raised, free-range chickens in California. While the federal government makes an indemnification payment for birds that have to be destroyed, Ms. Ramsdell said the farm will still suffer "tens of thousands" of dollars in losses, and it will take at least six months to repopulate with hens and to resume business.

"Anybody in the animal industry right now should be nervous," Ms. Ramsdell said. "Until we collectively come together and get some solid, concrete answers about what is happening, I don't think it's going to stop."

Federal health officials have been closely watching the latest strain of avian influenza that is lethal to chickens and also has been found in cattle, which typically recover from the flu with treatment. Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that the risk to humans remains low, and that pasteurized milk products remain safe to consume. Eggs are also safe to eat, as long as they are cooked to appropriate temperatures to kill bacteria and viruses, but the cost is likely to climb higher and gaps on store shelves are likely to grow, analysts warn.

"It could take six months for the market to stabilize," said Brian Moscogiuri, a vice president at Eggs Unlimited, a wholesaler based in California. "We need to see outbreaks of avian influenza stop. We need a period of time when the farms aren't being impacted and can repopulate their chickens and we need to see demand start to slow down."

In addition to infecting laying hens, the virus has also struck farms that raise chicks to be sold to egg-laying operations. Farms that culled chickens infected with the virus will have to wait longer to repopulate their operations.

"If you were to place an order today for baby chicks, you may not receive them until April or October of 2026," said Ms. Rispoli.

Poultry of all kinds are susceptible to the H5N1 virus. Turkey operations have reported cases, and food industry analysts are now closely monitoring the first reports of an outbreak in broiler chickens, bred for meat production, in Georgia, the largest poultry producing state in the country. The outbreak at two farms near one another in northern Georgia was confirmed in mid-January, leading to the disposal of around 175,000 chickens, said Matthew Agvent, communications director with the Georgia Department of Agriculture. But to contain the spread, the state ordered a quarantine zone of 6.2 miles around the two farms, limiting the ability of another 120 poultry farms within that zone to deliver chickens to processors without special approval, Mr. Agvent said.

Egg producers are ramping up their calls for lawmakers to move quickly to develop and administer vaccines to the nation's chicken and bird population.

But even a vaccine might not eradicate the continuing outbreak, said Chad Hart, an economics professor at Iowa State University. In addition to the uncertain cost of vaccinating more than 300 million birds, avian influenza is constantly changing, meaning a vaccine could miss a new strain that develops. Indeed, in early January, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said none of the vaccines available on the market matched the current virulent strain found in the most recent outbreak.

And vaccinating all birds in the United States could damage poultry exports, Mr. Hart said. The United States exports some \$5.5 billion in poultry meat each year.

"Different countries have different standards that they utilize when it comes to vaccinations," said Mr. Hart. "Vaccines have been used as a reason to block imports and exports from different countries over the years."

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the bird flu and its effects on food prices? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.