

Remarks by Secretary Napolitano at the Media Briefing on the H1N1 Flu Outbreak - April 28, 2009



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Secretary Napolitano: Thanks, and good afternoon. I'd like to provide you with the latest information in our efforts to respond to the H1N1 flu outbreak.

First, I'd like to reiterate what President Obama said yesterday. This outbreak is a cause for concern, not yet a cause for alarm. Because the number of confirmed cases continues to rise and will likely rise in the next few days, we recognize that many Americans are rightly concerned about their own health and safety. I share that concern. The President shares that concern. But we are confident in the efforts underway across the federal government and across state and local governments to keep Americans safe and healthy.

The Department of Homeland Security, HHS [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services], the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], and our many partners continue to take aggressive action to prevent the further spread of the H1N1 virus and to mitigate its impact. Before I recap those efforts, I want to announce that we are establishing an operations coordination task force to deal with the 2009 H1N1 outbreak. This task force will assist me in my role as the principal federal official of this incident. It will consist of chiefs of staff of relevant departments and agencies, and focus on operations, coordination, and mitigation. As noted earlier today, the President also has requested \$1.5 billion to support H1N1 response. So let me recap other efforts underway.

The public health emergency declared by the Department of Health and Human Services on Sunday remains in effect. This clears the way to move resources around to meet needs that might arise, and to coordinate actions across government to address the outbreak.

There are currently 50 million treatment courses of antiviral drugs—Tamiflu and Relenza are the commercial names—in the National Strategic Stockpile. At this stage, we are releasing about 12 million courses of antivirals and key medical equipment to states. This is about 25 percent of the total. We are prioritizing those states where cases have been confirmed.

Materials are currently en route to Arizona, California, Indiana, New York, and Texas. New York and Arizona will receive their materials today, and we estimate all states and territories will receive their allocation by the third of May.

The State Department travel advisory for Mexico remains in effect. It recommends against all nonessential travel to Mexico. The United States Embassy in Mexico City and all of the United States Consulates also have suspended all nonessential services to the public until May sixth.

At our borders, Customs and Border Protection [CBP] continues to watch for signs of illness among travelers entering the United States. All persons entering from a location with reported human infection of H1N1 flu will be processed through all appropriate CBP protocols. These actions match the recommendations by both the CDC and the World Health Organization, based on what we currently know about H1N1.

Our focus at this time is not on closing the border or conducting exit screenings. It is on mitigation. Travelers presenting symptoms, if and when encountered, will be isolated and evaluated by a public health official. Customs and Border Protection is also handing out the CDC Traveler's Health Alert notices in both English and Spanish to all travelers from Mexico.

The Transportation Security Administration, the TSA, has instituted similar protocols at our airports, watching for individuals exhibiting flu-like symptoms and taking appropriate measures.

We continue to conduct daily conference calls with Homeland Security advisors, state and local elected officials,

Fusion Centers, our private sector partners, and congressional representatives, as well as coordinating our efforts with our international partners. We are working in lockstep to respond to this outbreak.

Other departments across the federal government also are taking action. You'll hear in a moment from Secretary Vilsack, but the Department of Agriculture [USDA] continues to work with state animal health officials to affirm that they have no cases of this virus in their states. To date, no cases have been reported.

The USDA and the United States Trade Representative [Ron Kirk] also are reminding our trading partners that United States pork and pork products are safe, and there is no basis for restricting imports.

You should also know that you cannot get H1N1 from eating pork. Pork products are perfectly safe.

Beyond these efforts, it's important to recognize that everyone across the United States has a role to play in addressing this outbreak. If you are feeling sick and show signs of the flu, stay home. If your children aren't feeling well, they should stay home from school. You should wash your hands often and cover your mouth when you cough.

We are working around the clock to monitor the situation. We will keep the public informed as the picture develops. We anticipate holding these briefings on a regular basis to make sure that accurate information is provided to the public.

With that, I'd like to introduce Secretary Tom Vilsack, Department of Agriculture.

Secretary Vilsack: Thank you very much. And first of all, let me say from a USDA perspective that obviously our hearts go out to all those families who have been affected by the H1N1 virus, those who have lost loved ones and those who are currently with those who are sick.

Obviously, at USDA, we're also concerned about a lot of hard-working farm families around the United States. We are interested in making sure that they can continue to raise pork and also be able to sell it here in America around the world. So we are aggressively working with our state ag departments and state veterinarians to make sure that we can constantly be aware of any changes in current status. As of today, as Secretary Napolitano indicated, we have no indication that any swine from the United States has been infected. We are constantly getting updates, and if that were to change, we would obviously notify folks immediately.

We have also taken the step of working through our foreign agricultural service as well as with Ambassador Kirk and the Trade Representative's office to send the message to all of our trading partners that we are open for business. We believe that there is no reason to stop or ban pork or pork products in the United States. As the Secretary indicated, it is perfectly safe to consume pork or products from America. We're going to continue to trade. And we're going to continue to work with our trading partners to make sure that we answer any questions that they might have to make sure that the borders are open and trading lanes continue to be open.

I want to take this opportunity to particularly note the efforts of the Japanese government, who have sent a very clear message to our trading partners that this is not a food-borne illness, that you cannot contract it from consuming pork, and that the importation of American pork and pork products is safe.

We'll continue to work to answer questions from countries that have taken other actions. We are trying to underscore the fact that actions taken to ban or prevent the importation of pork or beef or any other product from the United States is not scientifically based, and could result in some serious trade disruptions. But I'll let the Trade Representative speak more fully about that.

Ambassador Kirk: Thank you, Mr. Secretary and Madam Secretary. Thank you for convening this. I'll try not to repeat those points made by Secretary Napolitano or our Agriculture Secretary.

One, we want to first of all extend our sympathies and concerns to those families that have been affected. This is first and foremost a health crisis, one that has not risen to the level of alarm, as the President said. But secondly, we want to make sure that a handful of our trading partners don't take advantage of this legitimate concern over public health and engage in behavior that could also damage the world's economy.

We are suffering through the strongest recession that we have seen in quite some times, and any actions or activity engaged in by any of our trading partners not based on sound science and not based on our rules-based system of governing could do extraordinary damage, not just to our economy but to those of other countries as well. And in that regard, we are especially grateful to Japan for the strong statement that they have made with

regards to pork products from the United States, which are safe.

And so we want to say to consumers here and abroad that there is no risk to you. There is no scientific evidence whatsoever that there is any link between consuming pork or prepared pork products and the H1N1 virus.

So for members of the press, Secretary Vilsack and I issued a press statement earlier. I think we have copies of that available for you as well. In the interests of time, I won't go over that. But I'm prepared to answer any of your questions you might have that can't be answered by the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Moderator: Take some questions. Pete?

Question: Secretary Napolitano, could I ask you to give us some kind of an update of what you're finding on the borders? Are a lot of people who appear to have symptoms or report illness being set aside for these secondary screenings?

Secretary Napolitano: To date, no. There's been very little of that. But again, this is a changing situation. Tomorrow may be a different report. But to date, no.

Question: Secretary Vilsack, what is the point of monitoring the swine population? If you can't get this flu from swine, why check swine at all?

Secretary Vilsack: Because it could impact and affect the industry itself. This is more about the economics of it rather than the human side and human illness side of it.

Question: Just because of the name, swine flu? I mean, you're not looking at horses or cows or anything else.

Secretary Vilsack: Which is precisely the reason why we have asked and there has been a response to change the name of this. This really isn't swine flu. It's H1N1 virus. That's very, very important. And it is significant because there are a lot of hard-working families whose livelihood depends on us conveying this message of safety. And it's not just simply pork production. It's also grain farmers because markets are very sensitive. They react to positive news. They also react to negative news.

And the livelihoods of a lot of people are at stake here, and we want to reinforce the fact that we're doing everything we possibly can to make sure that our hog industry is sound and safe, and to make sure that consumers in this country and around the world know that American products are safe.

Question: Madam Secretary, there's a report out of California that authorities there are investigating a possible death from swine flu. And also, separately, a report out of New York that hundreds of school kids may be sick with suspected swine flu. What are you hearing from those two states or other states?

Secretary Napolitano: We have a number of states that are reporting illness. And as you note, there's several cases—I think two—in California. But they have not been confirmed that those are actually a product of H1N1, so those diagnoses are going on.

But let me lay some groundwork here for you. It is very likely that we will see more serious presentations of illness and some deaths as we go through this flu cycle. In a normal seasonal influenza cycle, we would anticipate across the United States 35,000 deaths. Of course, this is not a seasonal flu. But I think it would not be unexpected that there will be some more severe illness and some deaths as we proceed forward.

Moderator: Mike?

Question: Secretary Vilsack, have you heard any anecdotal stories or evidence of farmers who have been impacted by at this already?

Secretary Vilsack: The last two days, the pork prices have been down. The last two days, soybean prices have been down. Yesterday, corn prices went down. So virtually anybody who's in the pork business, in the corn business, or the soybean business has potentially had an impact or effect.

And if this continues, obviously, you have significant potential, which is why it's important to get this right. This is not a food-borne illness, virus. It is not correct to refer to it as swine flu because there's really—that's not what this is about. It is about a human-to-human transmission, which is why the Department of Homeland Security is taking mitigation steps to minimize those contacts. And it is important to convey the message that consuming pork or pork products will not cause and cannot cause the illnesses that we're dealing with.

So it's a very important message to send in terms of the economics of this. And I think Ambassador Kirk is absolutely right about this. Obviously, we're concerned about people's safety. But we're also concerned about the impact on the economy of these farm families.

Moderator: Tom?

Question: Can I ask you about the [inaudible]? The question is, have they been used at all? Is anything happening [inaudible] a step up in preparedness or [inaudible]?

Secretary Napolitano: They have not—you're talking about the 19 quarantine stations in the airports. To my knowledge, they have not yet been used. But we have sent guidance and protocols out to our TSA workers, and also Customs and Border Protection workers, who are at our airports who have international entrants of what to look for and what to screen for. So they are prepared to use them.

Question: Are you keeping track of how many people might be set aside for observation by health officials?

Secretary Napolitano: We are collecting data. But again, I think our best estimate right now is that we are at the beginning of what could be a long flu cycle. And we may see a period of interruption; that is, to say that because we're at the beginning of the summer, this particular outbreak may die off naturally and we may see a resurgence again in the fall.

So we're in this for the long haul. That's why we've now set up, on a semi-permanent basis as we go through this H1N1 outbreak, an interagency structure to move us forward. That's why we've got state and local public health and also other authorities working now with us on a daily basis. Because this is going to be a marathon.

Question: With the distribution of the antiviral drugs, are you providing guidelines to the states about who should get it—health care workers, besides those affected? And also, are you seeing any signs that the general public are trying to get hold of Tamiflu or other antiviral drugs sort of prophylactically? And how much would that affect supplies?

Secretary Napolitano: Yes. Some of that may be better addressed to the CDC in terms of the Tamiflu and the Relenza. But after the Department of Health and Human Services issued the public health declaration on Sunday, that allowed for the issuance of a subsequent emergency authorization. And what that means is that's an FDA-related declaration so that Tamiflu, for example, could be prescribed to a child who's younger than one year old, which normally would not be the case. So that's all in place right now.

Who actually is getting Tamiflu and how it's getting out, I don't have the answer right now. But I can tell you as a former governor that at the state and local level, most states have a pandemic flu plan. And part of that plan, of course, is how medicine and other things are distributed.

Moderator: Eileen?

Question: Have the CDC protocols for screening changed between yesterday and today at all? And have we seen any outbreaks such as a ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement] detention centers?

Secretary Napolitano: The answer is no to the first question. On the second question, we had some suspected cases with regard to a group of detainees, but it turns out it was—their illness was not H1N1.

Moderator: Spencer?

Question: Is the U.S. considering requiring additional diagnostic testing of travelers before they enter the U.S., such as air travelers? And will the U.S. provide Tamiflu or other medicines to Mexico? If so, would it come from civilian, military, or other stockpiles? And just a follow-up on the distribution question. Will it be up to the states to determine when an individual can get medicine, if supplies will be made available prophylactically? And who decides how many a state gets?

Secretary Napolitano: Last question first. Primarily, the state allocation is based on population. But again, we are distributing first to states that have had confirmed instances.

With regard to the second question, we have no requests from other countries for Tamiflu right now. The World Health Organization has its own stockpile of antivirals, and I think they have something like 150 million courses there. And so I don't know whether they've received any requests to date.

Give me your first question again? I was going backwards.

Moderator: This is like an eight-part question, Spencer.

Question: [Inaudible] on follow-up. Are they still testing travelers before they enter the U.S. and considering that for like air passengers?

Secretary Napolitano: The answer is: not today. But again, we will proceed on a day-to-day basis. And if that changes, we'll of course immediately let the public know.

Question: To follow-up, who makes the decision on whether people can get medicine? Do they have to be sick before they can get it?

Secretary Napolitano: There are—as I said in response to an earlier question, states by and large have pandemic plans and public health authorities have plans for medicine distribution. But right now, given the size of the stockpile we have—the 50 million courses in the national stockpile; the states themselves have something like another 23 million courses—not doses, courses—and I believe the Department of Defense has another seven million courses. So right now, we have the supply to meet the demand.

And I believe—and you can address this to the CDC—but I believe they're in discussion with the manufacturer to ramp up more production of the antivirals.

Moderator: Jason, last question.

Question: Do you think you're doing enough to protect the airports right now with the airport screenings? The World Health Organization's avian flu expert said this morning that he felt that those screenings were just for show, and weren't really effective, and more should be done.

Secretary Napolitano: Well, I think he was responding to the issue about closing the borders. And what he was saying in the context was that that is not going to mitigate or contain this virus. But our recommendations and the things we are doing on screening match what the WHO and other groups have recommended.

We're following the advice of the public health specialists. We're listening to the scientists, the epidemiologists, primarily at CDC. We are matching their advice. And then our job across many departments is to implement that across agriculture, trade, and across, of course, homeland security.

Moderator: Okay. Thanks, guys.

Question: Can we have one more question for Ambassador Kirk?

Ambassador Kirk: I think the Secretary—

Question: Have you spoken with your Chinese or Russian counterparts about the pork products?

Ambassador Kirk: I have not. I was scheduled to have a call with my counterpart from Russia, but I delayed that in order to be here. But we'll be reaching out and talking with all of those countries that have taken steps thus far to limit the importation of American products.

Secretary Napolitano: Thanks, all.

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