

Russia says bird flu may hit US in autumn, mutate(reuters)

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MOSCOW (Reuters) – The deadly bird flu virus, which has hit Asia, Europe and Africa, may spread to the United States late this year and risks mutating dangerously there, Russia's top animal and plant health inspector said on Thursday.

"We think that H5N1 (strain of bird flu virus) will reach the United States in autumn," Sergei Dankvert told Reuters.

"This is very realistic. We may be almost certain this will happen after this strain is found in Great Britain, before autumn, as migrating birds will carry it to the United States from there."

He said there was also an opportunity of the virus spreading by fowl migrating from Siberia's Tyumen region to Alaska and mixing there with birds flying to Canada and to other parts of the United States.

"But we believe this is a longer route," Dankvert said.

"We forecast that bird flu mutation is possible in the countries where the number of different viruses is high. This group includes the United States," Dankvert added.

Bird flu has spread with alarming speed in recent weeks across Europe, Africa, and parts of Asia.

The U.S. government is treating avian flu as a scourge that will inevitably reach the United States and is preparing accordingly, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns said this week.

The virus occasionally infects people who have direct contact with infected birds and has killed around 100 people since late 2003.

Scientists fear that the virus may mutate into a form which could easily pass from one person to another, causing a pandemic, in which millions could die.

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