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Avian flu: Canadian businesses need a plan

Some 250 Canadians who live and work in Cernavoda, a town of 20,000 people in eastern Romania, were among the first Canadians to experience disruptions from the avian flu virus after its discovery in the Danube delta this year led to travel restrictions in the area.

In its recent publication, *Pandemic Preparedness Plan for Canadian Business*, the CME recommends businesses name a pandemic coordinator and identify essential employees and critical inputs such as raw materials and suppliers. It also recommends forecasting employee absences and training and preparing an ancillary workforce—retirees, perhaps—who can step in if needed.

Once a pandemic is declared, the CME says businesses should have guidelines in place to minimize contact between people by limiting travel, plan for telecommuting and flexible work hours, establish cough etiquette and decree mandatory sick leave should people become ill.

In addition, businesses should have plans for evacuating people working in an affected area and for dealing with employees returning from affected areas.

In a recent seminar sponsored by the Gartner Group on business continuity planning for a pandemic, 50% of the participants said their organization had appointed a person responsible for pandemic planning, and only 35% had developed a business continuity plan specifically for pandemic influenza.

It's impossible to predict how big any disruptions could be in a pandemic, how long they might last and what their lasting effects could be. There are just too many unknowns.

But the cost to the world economy is potentially enormous: the World Bank, in its report *Avian Flu – Economic Impact*, notes that the SARS outbreak in East Asia resulted in a 2% drop in East Asia's GDP in the second quarter of 2003.

see page 2 - Experts say avian flu potentially devastating



AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

A Romanian health worker sprays bird flu disinfectant on a truck transporting goods from Turkey, where there was an outbreak of bird flu cases in humans.

While no one became ill, the episode was evidence that Canadians who do business abroad will be among the first to feel the effects of an influenza pandemic. Both government and industry officials are urging Canadian exporters to get ready now even though no one knows when or how it will hit.

What's at stake besides the risk to human health? "In many instances, it's the survival of the business," says Perrin Beatty, President of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters (CME), Canada's largest trade and industry association.



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