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Plan ahead for avian flu pandemic, businesses told

By Wendy Leung

B.C. companies must develop a plan to deal with business disruptions and protect their employees if there is an avian influenza **pandemic**, say business and health experts.

"If you don't have a business continuity plan and know what you're going to do before it hits you, there's a pretty good chance your business won't survive the disruption," Ann Wyganowski, vice-president of HZX Business Continuity Planning, said Thursday.

She was speaking during a Vancouver forum on avian influenza organized by the provincial Economic Development and Health Ministries.

Some estimates suggest 35 per cent of companies without a contingency plan go out of business when they experience a disruption like a **pandemic**, Wyganowski said.

Officials have warned that avian influenza could cause massive health and economic damage if it mutates into a form transmissible amongst humans. A **pandemic** could prompt governments to impose travel restrictions, disrupt the demand for goods and services, and hurt productivity, experts say.

Companies should know well in advance how they will move inventory if travel and border restrictions are imposed, Wyganowski said. They should also develop a communications strategy to keep employees and customers informed of their plans.

Businesses with employees overseas should know how to move them out of the countries they are working in if a **pandemic** occurs, she added.

Wyganowski suggested businesses should also provide ways for employees to work from home or alternative locations.

"You should be thinking about how to do that now," she said.

With more than 70,000 workers worldwide, aluminum manufacturer Alcan is already preparing for a **pandemic**.

Alcan, which has an aluminum smelter in Kitimat, has established a special avian influenza committee that is monitoring the risks, said Vern Davis, an occupational physician for Alcan.

"We can't afford to wait until it comes to B.C." Davis said.

The company will tell employees what they should do to protect themselves during business trips abroad. It also has made plans to relocate production if any plants have to be shut down, Davis said.

Ray Roch, director of the worker and employer services division of WorkSafe BC, stressed the need for companies to monitor what local government agencies are doing to prepare for a **pandemic**. Companies need to cooperate with local authorities and learn to apply safety rules and procedures.

"You need to stay current," Roch said.

"If you're staying on top of it...you'll be able to prepare quite well when the next **pandemic** hits."

wleung@png.canwest.com

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Pandemic would shock economy

By Mark Hume

VANCOUVER

When an influenza **pandemic** next strikes the world, as it is predicted to do sooner or later, its most important impact will be on the health of individuals.

But participants in a pioneering conference in British Columbia yesterday heard about a second front where a disease outbreak will register shock waves: on the health of businesses and the global economy.

Some financial projections predict a **pandemic** will trigger a global recession, with the worldwide trade of goods and services contracting by about 14 per cent, the equivalent of \$2.5-trillion.

While the focus of most governments has been on medical aspects of a **pandemic**, experts attending the Pacific **Pandemic** Forum for Business said corporate planning can be almost as important.

"Planning is critical. . . . Business continuity and contingency planning is what this is all about," said Andrew Wilkinson, deputy minister for the B.C. Ministry of Economic Development.

He said it was the first conference of its kind in North America.

Erik Bloom, an economist with the Asian Development Bank, said it is difficult to predict what will happen economically, given all the unknowns about the next **pandemic**.

But he presented some scenarios, saying that while the numbers aren't firm, they do paint a broad picture of what might happen.

He said two scenarios were developed, both assuming a relatively mild **pandemic** that kills three million Asians, but with different levels of psychological impact on the population. In the most severe case, the world would be forced into a recession, and the estimated loss in Asia would be about \$282-billion, around 6.5 percentage points of the gross domestic product for East, South and Southeast Asia.

He said it would take Asia's economy three years to recover - but he stressed that Asia and the world would bounce back economically, comparing it to the recession of the late 1980s.

"We took our lumps and recovered then," he said. "It would certainly not be a major depression."

Angela Trudeau, senior researcher with BMO Financial Group, said all businesses in Canada would be affected, even those that wouldn't have employees off sick.

"It's all of our problem," she said, stressing that supply chains are far more interlinked than at any time in history.

"Look at your purchase orders. . . . If you were to analyze how many companies in how many countries you deal with, you'd be surprised," she said. "You could say we are handcuffed together."

Ms. Trudeau said it is not cynical for business leaders to plan ways to minimize the impact of a **pandemic**, because by staying in operation they contribute not just to their own corporate well-being, but to the stability of society.

"We've also got to take care of business - and if you do that you'll be contributing significantly," she said.

Ms. Trudeau told the 100 people in attendance that just by discussing and preparing for a **pandemic** they are taking a big step, because their advance knowledge will help lower the level of panic that will occur when a disease outbreak strikes.

Danuta Skowronski, an epidemiologist with the BC Centre for Disease Control, said an influenza **pandemic** is inevitable, although nobody can predict when it will happen.

"The clock is ticking, but we don't know what time it is," she said, outlining how the H5N1 avian-flu virus has spread to 16 countries in Asia and, more recently, to Europe.

The B.C. Ministry of Health has established a website to help individuals and organizations plan for a **pandemic**. It is located at:
<http://www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/pho/pandemic.html>

National Post, Page FP4, 16-Dec-2005

Companies beginning to prepare for the worst

By Jason Kirby

VANCOUVER - Alcan Inc. has created a special committee to deal with the threat of a global outbreak of avian influenza, putting it far ahead of most other Canadian companies that are ill-prepared to deal with the economic fallout of a **pandemic**.

"Because we have more than 500 sites around the world we've had to think of these issues and how to respond," Dr. Vern Davis, an occupational physician with Alcan, said in an interview during a conference here on how businesses can prepare for a **pandemic**.

"Do we have enough masks, how many would we need, where would we get them," said Dr. Davis. "You don't normally deal with those issues as an aluminum company."

There is growing concern among scientists that the H5N1 bird flu strain that has killed more than 70 people in Asia since 2003 could mutate and spread to millions worldwide.

Companies are now beginning to seriously look at how such a catastrophe would affect them.

By some estimates the fallout would be huge. The global economy could decline by US\$280-billion, or about 6.5 percentage points, depending on the severity of the **pandemic**, according to Dr. Erik Bloom, an economist with the Asian Development Bank in Manila.

"It wouldn't cause an Asian recession but it would be pretty close," he said.

The psychological impact on consumer demand would be 20 times greater than the actual effect an outbreak would have on supply, he told the conference, organized by the British Columbia government.

Representatives from a host of organizations, including WestJet Airlines, drug maker Merck Frosst Canada and the British Columbia Securities Commission, listened as Mr. Bloom said the tourism industry would be hardest hit, but also financial services, consulting and companies that rely on global supply chains.

Ann Wyganowski, a Toronto consultant who helped Nortel Networks Corp. draft its business continuity program, said the tech giant has adopted many strategies to help it deal with a **pandemic**.

"Companies have a responsibility to their employees and shareholders to be properly prepared," said Ms. Wyganowski in an interview. "Most haven't even started that process."

Alcan, which set up avian flu committees at its head office and every one of its sites three months ago, adopted a colour-coded alert system, said Dr. Davis.

In the event of a **pandemic** affecting one of its operations the company has looked at such things such as how to screen workers, how to keep the healthy away from the sick, what to do with expatriates and travelling employees and whether to shut down a site.

"It's a work in progress," he said. "But this way we'll be able to react better."