

**For discussion
On 10 July 2001**

**LegCo Panel on
Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Segregation of Live Quails from Other Live Poultry and the
Requirement for Water Bird Offal to be Packed and Sealed for Sale**

PURPOSE

This paper sets out the Administration's proposal to amend

- (a) the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139, sub. leg.);
- (b) the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Animal Trader) Regulations (Cap. 139, sub. leg.) and
- (c) the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132, sub. leg.)

to segregate live quails from other live birds at import, transportation and wholesale and retail levels, and to require carcasses of water birds to be packed separately from offal of water birds and to require offal of water birds to be packed and sealed for delivery to and sale at premises where live poultry are present.

BACKGROUND

Segregation of live quail and other birds

2. Recent scientific research has revealed that genetic material from H9 and H6 influenza viruses commonly carried by quail mixed with that from a mild goose H5N1 virus can form the lethal 1997 H5N1

chicken influenza virus. We know that quail in our markets still carry these H9 and H6 viruses, and in May this year we had the incursion of the reassortant goose-type H5N1 virus into our retail markets. Experts are of the view that if we allow these viruses to co-exist, reassortment of genetic material could happen leading to the emergence of a virus similar to the 1997 strain in our markets. Though we have already taken the necessary measures to remove the H5 virus from the market and to minimise the chance of its returning, removal of quail viruses by segregation of live quail from other live birds will further reduce the risk of reassortment occurring in our markets.

Requiring offal of water birds to be packed and sealed for sale

3 Water birds, including ducks and geese, are natural carriers of H5 avian influenza viruses and can pass on these virus to other poultry. As a matter of public health policy, the farming, transportation, slaughtering and trading of live chickens and of water birds have been segregated at all levels since early 1998 through legislative amendments to minimise the risk of transmission of Influenza A H5N1 virus from water birds to live chickens and subsequently to humans. Conditions in livestock keeping licences were also amended to prohibit local farmers from keeping land-based poultry and water birds on the same farm.

4. In the recent avian flu incident, there was extensive infection of chickens at retail outlets caused by a genetically re-assorted H5 goose-type virus. Taking into account expert advice, we decided to slaughter all live poultry at retail outlets to break the infection cycle of the virus. After thorough cleansing and disinfection at the market and retail outlets, retail sale of live poultry resumed on 16 June 2001. We have taken additional measures to strengthen the segregation of water birds and other live poultry, to improve market hygiene and to improve the surveillance system.

5. Experts are of the view that the genetically re-assorted H5 goose-type virus originated in water bird and then crossed to chickens. This virus may be found in the offal of water bird, especially the intestines and one possibility is that the virus crossed over to live chickens at retail outlets where water bird offal were sold. Workers at retail outlets who handled offal of water birds and then handled live chickens without washing their hands could potentially transmit the virus to other poultry. There is need to improve further the current segregation policy of water birds and reduce the chance of cross-contamination from offal of water birds.

PROPOSAL

Segregation of live quail and other birds

6 We propose that we should require live quail destined for consumption to be segregated from other live birds at all levels of transportation and sale, i.e. from import to retail for imported quail and from farm to retail for local quails. We also propose that we should not grant any licence and permission for selling live quail in public markets. Local quail farms are already rearing quail alone. Nevertheless, we intend to amend the conditions of the Livestock Keeping Licences to prohibit the keeping of quail with other poultry on the same farm.

7 At present, wholesaling of live quail take place at the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Poultry Wholesale Market together with the wholesaling of other live land-based birds. We do not propose to provide a dedicated wholesale market or central slaughtering facilities for live quail because the demand for such a facility is likely to be very limited. Any person who wishes to sell live quail can continue to do so on successful application for the requisite licences and permission. In considering the application for these licences and permission, we will take into consideration, among other things, whether there are poultry stalls in the vicinity of the proposed premises for selling quail and whether segregation of live quails and other live birds can actually and practically be segregated at all levels.

8 To give effect to this proposal, amendments have to be made to the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations, the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Animal Traders) Regulations and the Food Business Regulation.

9 We have so far not seen any convincing evidence that other game birds such as chukars, pheasants and guinea fowls are likely carriers of the H6 and H9 viruses that can reassort with H5 virus to develop into lethal avian influenza viruses similar to the 1997 strain. We are, nevertheless, monitoring closely the scientific research that is being conducted into these other game birds. If in the future there is evidence to show that they pose a similar risk as live quails, we will propose the same segregation measure for these birds.

Requiring offal of water birds to be packed and sealed for sale

10. To reduce the chance of cross-contamination from offal of water birds we propose to require water bird carcass to be packed separately from offal of water birds, and offal of water birds to be packed and sealed when sold in shops where live poultry are kept. To ensure that the packing and sealing process does not take place in retail outlets where live poultry are present, we propose to require all offal of water birds delivered to and sold at these outlets to be packed and sealed. There should be no breaking or tampering with the packaging and sealing until the offal has been sold and taken away from the retail shop. Water bird offal delivered to and sold at retail outlets or delivered to restaurants where no live poultry are kept need not be subject to this requirement.

11. Amendments will have to be made to the Food Business Regulation to give effect to this proposal.

CONSULTATION

12. We are consulting the trades and have consulted the Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene about the proposal above. We have also informed the State General Administration for Quality Supervision and Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) of the proposed arrangements which also applicable to imports. They have responded positively. We will take into account the views of all parties concerned when finalizing the proposal.

ADVICE SOUGHT

13 Members are invited to comment on the proposal in paragraphs 6-11.

Environment and Food Bureau
July 2001