

**For discussion
On 18 June 2001**

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

**Reopening of Poultry Stalls and
Monitoring Measures to Prevent Recurrence of Avian Flu**

Introduction

We closed all retail outlets of live poultry and slaughtered all live poultry there from 18 to 20 May this year. Subsequently, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) thoroughly cleansed and disinfected the markets. During the closure period, we placed sentinel chickens in the markets to test for the avian flu virus. The results of these measures are satisfactory. We will reopen the Cheung Sha Wan Poultry Wholesale Market on 15 June and the supply of imported and local live chickens will resume. The sale of live poultry in retail outlets will resume on 16 June.

Experts agreed that the latest avian flu incident was caused by extensive infection of chickens by a genetically re-assorted H5 goose-type virus. The experts were of the view that the virus infected chickens through a number of means and not through a single channel.

Improvement Measures

As the avian flu virus can infect chickens by different means, we have examined critically the entire supply flow of live poultry and have devised a series of improvement measures. Details are provided in the following paragraphs :-

Handling of ducks and geese

Ducks and geese are natural carriers of avian flu viruses. The latest incident was caused by a goose-type virus which showed signs of re-assortment infecting chickens. We have therefore enhanced the measures to segregate live ducks and geese from live chickens.

At present, live geese are transported by boat directly to the Western Wholesale Market for slaughter. Starting from 10 June, vehicles transporting live ducks are not allowed to deliver live chickens to prevent interchangeable use of cages for these two types of poultry. We will also amend as soon as possible the subsidiary legislation of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap 132) to require separate packing of carcasses and viscera of ducks and geese before they are sold at retail outlets. Before the new legislation is passed, we shall request the poultry trade to co-operate to put this new measure into practice.

Rest Day for Cleansing

We consider that the most effective measure is to specify a rest day every month for cleansing poultry wholesale markets and retail outlets. On the rest days, traders would suspend the sale of live chickens and vacate their stalls for thorough cleansing and disinfection to break the virus cycle. We have received positive feedback from the trades and decided to set aside the 25th day of every month as the territory-wide rest day for cleansing.

The first "rest day for cleansing" following the reopening of retail outlets will fall on 25 July. We have agreed with the trades over the other rest days in the coming six months. We shall remind the public of the arrangements in due course.

Measures to Improve the Hygiene Condition of Markets

(a) Measures taken prior to the reopening of retail outlets

We have adopted the following measures to improve the overall hygiene condition of markets to prevent markets from becoming the hotbed for viruses :

- Poultry stalls operators have completed three rounds of cleansing and disinfection under the supervision of FEHD. Special inspection teams of Veterinary Officers and Health

Inspectors have inspected all poultry stalls. The hygiene condition of the stalls were found satisfactory;

- FEHD has made an effort in improving the ventilation of poultry stalls to improve air circulation and reduce indoor temperature there. With the help of the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, FEHD thoroughly cleansed the ventilation systems of all the poultry stalls in markets during the closure period. Some scalding rooms have also been installed with exhaust fans. With the assistance of the Architectural Services Department, FEHD has carried out some small-scale improvement works at poultry stalls and scalding rooms, including the replacement and repairing of damaged floor tiles, wall tiles and grating covers of culverts; and
- FEHD has started to arrange hygiene seminars for workers in the poultry trade. The seminars will brief them on the proper ways of delivering, storing, scalding and handling live poultry as well as the hygiene standard of poultry stalls. These seminars would help workers in the trade to handle live poultry properly and to prevent cross-contamination after the stalls are reopened.

(b) New Hygiene Guidelines

We have formulated new conditions for tenancy agreement/licence and new hygiene guidelines for poultry retail outlets. These conditions and guidelines-

- suggest the number of chickens in each cage in accordance with the density recommended by veterinary surgeons;
- require stall operators to avoid stacking up too many cages;
- require stall operators to report the number of chicken deaths to FEHD every day;
- require stall operators to use handcarts with bottom plates in moving poultry and cages to keep market passageways clean; and
- require cages for chickens to be sent back to the wholesale market for cleansing soon after the chickens are unloaded.

In addition to the existing staff stationed in markets, FEHD will deploy more Health Inspectors to inspect markets to ensure implementation of the hygiene guidelines. The Health Inspectors will also supervise the thorough cleansing by stall operators on "rest days" to maintain the hygiene standard of markets.

Wholesale Markets

For wholesale markets, we shall also change the current practice. At present, cage cleansing service is provided by trade associations and monitored by AFCD. In the future, AFCD will directly engage contractors to provide cage cleansing service and directly supervise the cleansing process.

As regards the Western Wholesale Market for geese and ducks, we shall also specify a "rest day for cleansing" every month to carry out thorough cleansing.

Farms

Although we did not find avian flu virus in the local farms in the latest incident, we shall step up publicity to inform farmers of the importance of preventing bird diseases and maintaining the hygiene standard of farms. We shall also amend the licensing conditions to prohibit the return of unsold chickens from markets to farms. We shall consult farmers on the new licensing condition with a view to bringing it into effect as soon as possible.

Avian Flu Surveillance System

In this latest incident, we were able to respond promptly to pre-empt the re-assortment of avian flu virus to a stage where public health might be affected. This is because our avian flu surveillance system has been effective. Although our surveillance system is one of the most comprehensive and most effective systems in the world, we conducted a review after the incident to identify room for further improvements. After the review, we have decided to make the following improvements:-

- increase the number of blood samples taken from chickens at the border;

- take blood samples, in addition to taking faecal samples, from chickens in wholesale markets for testing;
- take samples of dead chickens at retail markets for testing on a regular basis; and
- enhance the reporting mechanism on death of chickens in markets.

We shall allocate more resources to AFCD accordingly for the additional workload.

Segregation of Live Quails and Live Chickens

According to experts, if the viruses carried by waterfowls are mixed with those carried by live quails and the re-assorted viruses infect chickens, it is highly possible that a new strain of avian flu virus, which will affect humans, will emerge. While requirements are now provided for the segregation of waterfowls and live chickens, experts further recommended that live quails and live chickens should not be sold at the same place to further protect public health. We shall amend the legislation as soon as possible to prohibit the sale of these two types of poultry at the same place. Before the legislative amendment takes effect, AFCD and FEHD will discuss with the trades to seek their cooperation in stopping the sale of live quails.

Conclusion

We believe that we shall be able to prevent and monitor the existence, cross-contamination and spread of the avian flu virus more effectively upon the implementation of the above improvement measures. However, these measures can only reduce the risk of another avian flu outbreak. Unless we change the existing arrangements for selling live chickens and out diet preference for live chickens, the risk of another outbreak will continue to remain.

**Environment and Food Bureau
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