

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2) 2275/01-02
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the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/FE

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Friday, 8 February 2002 at 4:30 pm
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

- Members Present** : Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP (Chairman)
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Dr Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP
Hon James TO Kun-sun
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon WONG Yung-kan
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung
Dr Hon LO Wing-lok
- Members Attending** : Hon Mrs Selina CHOW LIANG Shuk-ye, JP
Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP
Hon Albert CHAN Wai-yip
- Members Absent** : Hon Jasper TSANG Yok-sing, JP
Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP
Hon WONG Sing-chi
- Public Officers Attending** : Mrs Lily YAM
Secretary for the Environment and Food
- Mrs Stella HUNG
Deputy Secretary for the Environment and Food (A)

Mrs Ingrid YEUNG
Principal Assistant Secretary for the Environment and Food (A) 1

Mrs Rita LAU
Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene

Mr W H CHEUK
Deputy Director (Environmental Hygiene)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Mr Thomas CHAN
Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

Dr K K LIU
Deputy Director of Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation

Dr Thomas TSANG
Consultant (Community Medicine)
Department of Health

Clerk in Attendance : Mrs Constance LI
Chief Assistant Secretary (2)5

Staff in Attendance : Ms Joanne MAK
Senior Assistant Secretary (2)2

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I. Meeting with the Administration

[LC Papers Nos. CB(2) 1105/01-02(01), CB(2) 1112/01-02(01), (02) and (03)]

The Chairman said that the special meeting was convened to discuss the outbreak of avian flu in some local farms in February 2002. He further said that a submission from owners of some chicken stalls in Tsuen Wan and Kwai Tsing was tabled at the meeting for members' reference.

Briefing by the Administration

2. At the Chairman's invitation, Secretary for the Environment and Food (SEF) briefed members on the latest detection of avian flu virus in some farms and a wholesale market. Referring to the Administration's paper, she gave an account of the recent avian flu incident as follows -

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- (a) In the early morning on 1 February, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) detected a batch of chickens with suspicious symptoms during a routine inspection at Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market. An investigation was conducted and the consignment of about 1 500 chickens was transferred from the wholesale market to the New Territories North Animal Management Centre. Some 120 chickens died during detention. AFCD took blood and faecal samples from the chickens for testing and destroyed the whole batch of chickens.
- (b) AFCD found that the chickens came from a farm in Kam Tin and immediately stopped the farm from delivering any chickens to the market. Investigation was carried out in the farm, and blood samples of chickens were collected for laboratory tests while veterinary officers were sent in for inspection.
- (c) Since a large number of chickens were found dead in that farm in Kam Tin on two consecutive days from 1 to 2 February, a decision was taken to depopulate the farm. The depopulation operation began on 3 February.
- (d) The departments concerned stepped up surveillance in local farms as well as the wholesale and retail markets and collected samples for laboratory tests. On 4 February, two other farm owners in Kam Tin reported that there were problems with their chickens. Subsequent investigation confirmed that one of the two farms was infected. The farm in question was closed and all chickens there were destroyed. As for the other farm, only a small number of chickens were found dead and investigation by AFCD continued.
- (e) On 5 February, AFCD confirmed that the farm under investigation the day before was infected. Chickens in another farm in Hung Shui Kiu were also affected. These farms were closed instantly and all chickens were slaughtered. Some 80 000 chickens were destroyed in these three farms.
- (f) To prevent the spread of virus from farms in Kam Tin, all farms in the area were closed and they were prohibited from supplying chickens to the market. Problems were also detected in another two farms outside the Kam Tin area (one in Pak Sha and the other in Lau Fau Shan). These two farms were shut down and placed under quarantine. As at 7 February, a total of 25 farms had been closed, including the four farms which had been found infected. Apart from these farms, no other local farms were found to be infected.

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- (g) Chickens in the wholesale and retail markets in general had not shown any signs of disease except in individual stalls in several markets. With the help of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), these stall owners destroyed their poultry and thoroughly cleansed and disinfected their stalls. Up to 7 February, some 6 000 live birds from 13 chicken stalls in the Tsuen Wan Market and 9 chicken stalls in seven other markets were destroyed.
- (h) The Expert Group on Avian Influenza was of the view that there was no evidence at the present stage that the virus affecting the chickens was the same as the one that affected humans in 1997. The Expert Group recommended that since infection was found in local farms, an additional Rest Day should be introduced in February. The same suggestion was also put forth by the trade.
- (i) After consultation with the trade, an additional Rest Day was put in place on 8 February.

3. SEF said that it was confirmed just before the meeting that two chicken farms in Kam Tin already on quarantine were infected. All the 28 000 chickens in the two farms had been destroyed. SEF added that so far, 25 farms had been quarantined. Out of these, six (five in Kam Tin and one in Hung Shui Kiu) were found to have been infected.

4. SEF said that if there were no new developments, local farms not quarantined could send their chickens to the retail market for sale on 9 February 2002. So far, she had not received any further report that chickens in other local farms had been infected. She added that the departments concerned would closely monitor the situation, especially the chicken farms in Kam Tin area.

5. SEF said that to prepare for the reopening of the retail market on 9 February, AFCD would introduce additional surveillance measures to inspect chickens from local farms. Detailed information on the new measures had been set out in paragraph 11 of the Administration's paper.

6. As regards the laboratory test results, SEF said that AFCD had received a preliminary report from the University of Hong Kong the afternoon before confirming that the virus in the first farm affected was H5N1. However, there was no indication that it was the same virus that took away six lives in 1997. SEF explained that there were many types of H5N1 viruses, and not all of them would affect humans.

7. SEF said that in considering actions to be taken to deal with the recent avian flu incident, the Administration would take the following factors into account -

- (a) the need to safeguard public health;

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- (b) the need to maintain a good standard of veterinary and environmental hygiene;
- (c) the public demand for live chickens; and
- (d) the interests of the trades concerned.

SEF stressed that (a) and (b) were the two most important considerations.

8. SEF further explained that a decision was not taken to depopulate all chickens in Hong Kong this time because the avian flu was different from the outbreak last May. She pointed out that on the last occasion, laboratory test results indicated that the H5N1 virus in some markets had shown signs of re-assortment. Within four days, the infection had spread to ten markets in Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories, and more than one chicken stall in each of these markets were affected. However, in the current incident the virus was confined to a few stalls in markets and a few farms. SEF assured members that the Administration would conduct detailed investigations into the current outbreak to establish the causes.

9. SEF further said that AFCD would review its regulatory control of local farms, including the licensing requirements and their enforcement. Although a comprehensive and proactive avian flu surveillance system had been put in place, AFCD and FEHD would review the system to see whether there were any weaknesses in implementation. SEF said that the Administration had already put in a lot of resources at different levels to control avian flu in order to safeguard public health. In fact, more than \$32 million was spent in monitoring and controlling avian flu each year.

10. SEF stressed that the farm owners, wholesalers and retailers of live chickens also had a responsibility to protect public health. There had been a few cases of stallholders not fully complying with the Rest Day requirements. SEF explained that the purpose of having a rest day was to break the cycle of any virus that might be lodged in the market, and stallholders must destroy all their chickens before the Rest Day, or else the purpose of the Rest Day would be defeated. However, she had learnt that the owners of two chicken stalls had removed their chickens before the Rest Day and then put them back in the stalls afterwards. SEF said that the full co-operation of the trade was essential for the surveillance system on avian flu to be effective, as it was not possible to have 24-hour surveillance on all the 146 existing chicken farms and some 800 chicken stalls. She pointed out that without the cooperation of the trade, avian flu would recur and would do damage both to the trade itself and to the public.

11. As regards Members' concern that two outbreaks of avian flu in Hong Kong had occurred within just one year, SEF said that experts had pointed out that bird viruses were prevalent in Southern China and the virus loading was getting

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increasingly heavy. She added that one of the characteristics of bird viruses was that they could spread very fast and mutate into different types. SEF considered that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to prevent such diseases. She said that it was high time for the community to seriously consider whether we should continue to bear the costs in order to meet the preference for live chickens.

12. As regards the written questions which the Chairman had forwarded to her before the meeting, SEF said that the replies had been prepared and would be made available to the Panel.

(Post-meeting note: The Administration's reply to the Chairman's questions were issued to members vide LC Paper No. CB(2)1112/01-02(03) dated 18 February 2002.)

Discussion

Causes of the outbreak and long-term solution

13. Mr Michael MAK expressed appreciation of the efforts of SEF, AFCD and FEHD in tackling the current outbreak. He asked if there were common grounds amongst the five infected farms, such as the sources of chickens. SEF replied that the infected chickens were all from farms in the Kam Tin area. She said that the Administration would look into the causes of the outbreak.

14. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong pointed out that the community as a whole was the "loser" in the recent avian flu outbreaks, because taxpayers' money had to be used to make compensations to the trade each time. He asked whether the Administration had found out the real causes of the outbreaks, for example, whether these were caused by system deficiencies, negligence of the trade or other factors. He also asked whether there were long-term solutions to effectively prevent the recurrence of avian flu.

15. SEF responded that the problem was not only economic loss, but also the threat to human health. She said that as experts had pointed out, bird viruses were prevalent in Southern China and the loading was getting increasingly heavy. Human influenza also originated from bird influenza. She added that microbiologists were also very worried about the situation in the region.

16. SEF pointed out that, with the present mode of operation of the trade, there were too many live chickens crowded together. Despite the new space requirement for chickens in each cage, non-compliance was often found especially during festivals when there was great demand for live chickens. SEF reiterated that given the limited manpower to conduct compliance checks, it was difficult to prevent the recurrence of avian flu if the mode of operation of the trade remained unchanged. She further said that experts had also advised that the threat of avian flu could not be eliminated, if the practice of stocking large numbers of live chickens at farms or at markets continued.

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17. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that it was also not cost-effective to deploy substantial resources and manpower to deal with outbreaks of avian flu each time. He urged the Administration to explore a long-term solution in collaboration with the trade to prevent the recurrence of avian flu. SEF responded that the Chief Executive had also acknowledged the need for the Administration to devise a long-term solution to the problem.

18. Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that she was unhappy about the recurrence of avian flu for twice in less than a year, as this had not only caused economic loss to the community but had also done damage to the reputation of Hong Kong and the trade. She further said that the community had become increasingly concerned about the recurrence of the infection and the cost for paying out compensation to the trade. She had also heard about criticisms that the lack of self-regulation of the trade had contributed to the outbreaks of avian flu. She urged the Administration to explore with the trade improvement measures to strengthen the surveillance system and to prevent the disease. Miss CHAN also expressed concern as to whether the Administration would introduce centralised slaughtering of chickens, as this would render some 60 000 members of the poultry industry jobless.

19. SEF responded that no matter how comprehensive the avian flu surveillance system was, it would be difficult to prevent the outbreak of the disease. Nevertheless, the Administration would continue to discuss possible measures with the trade and explain to them the need to strictly observe the licensing conditions and hygiene requirements. She said that the Administration had not yet taken a decision on centralised chicken slaughtering.

20. Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that there should be ways to better control the problem, such as improving the surveillance system and taking stringent enforcement. SEF responded that based on the experience of the two recent outbreaks, avian flu would easily recur if only one member of the trade failed to comply with the control requirements.

21. Mr WONG Yung-kan commented that it was painful experience to have recurrence of avian flu twice in a year. He urged the Administration to investigate the causes of the recent outbreaks. He said that during the motion debate last June concerning the avian flu incident, he had already pointed out the need for the Administration to strengthen the monitoring of local chicken farms and transportation of live poultry. He said that at present, there was no requirement of disinfection for people or vehicles entering or leaving poultry farms, and this could be conducive to the spread of avian flu. He further said that overseas countries had imposed very stringent control at the airport in respect of passengers who visited a poultry farm before entry.

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22. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked whether the Administration had set a daily import quantity for live chickens. He was worried that over-supply of live chickens from the Mainland would lead to accumulation or overcrowding of live chickens in the wholesale and retail markets. He urged the Administration to step up prosecution of farms and retail stalls which had kept more chickens than permitted. Mr WONG considered that with increased supply of chilled chickens from the Mainland, there would be less demand for live chickens in Hong Kong in the long run.

23. SEF responded that the Administration would continue to work hard on the control and monitoring measures. However, it was difficult to prevent the recurrence of avian flu because there would never be 100% guarantee that every member of the trade would fully comply with the hygiene requirements. She said that the Administration was also very concerned about the problems associated with over-supply of live chickens. She stressed that it was important for the trade to appreciate the risks of keeping so many live chickens in farms and retail outlets. As regards local farms keeping too many chickens, SEF said that AFCD would enforce the licensing requirements strictly. She was glad that the trade was now able to see the need to comply with the hygiene requirements.

24. Dr LO Wing-lok considered that recurrence of avian flu had adversely affected Hong Kong's image as a knowledge-based economy and international financial centre. He said that the tremendous economic loss caused by the outbreaks was against the interests of Hong Kong. He urged the Administration to formulate a long-term policy for the live chicken industry.

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Compensation

25. Dr LO Wing-lok commented that the current policy of compensating the trade for each slaughtered chicken might have induced chicken farmers or stallholders to purposely contravene the relevant hygiene requirements, in the hope of getting more compensation. He also noted that there were local farms keeping far more chickens than permitted under the licensing conditions. He suggested the Administration to step up enforcement and prosecute the operators of those farms/market stalls which were found in breach of the licensing conditions. He considered that it was only fair to set a ceiling on the amount of compensation for each farm or stall, based on the maximum number of chickens permitted to be kept in these premises.

26. SEF noted the concern in the community that compensation might have induced some members of the trade not making efforts to observe the hygiene requirements for the protection of public health. She explained that, under section 6 of the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Ordinance (Cap. 139), Government was required to pay compensation to poultry farmers/stallholders for birds slaughtered by order of the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DAFC). If the compensation did not exceed \$30 for each bird as required by law, approval of the Finance Committee would not be necessary.

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27. In response to the Chairman, SEF confirmed that she had received reports about unhygienic practices of some stalls, and about market stalls keeping an excessive number of live chickens. She said that the Administration would seek legal advice on whether prosecution could be taken in these cases.

Arrangements for the supply of chickens for the Lunar New Year

28. Mr Michael MAK asked whether there would be supply of live chickens for the Lunar New Year and whether supply at retail markets would resume on 9 February 2002. SEF responded that the current outbreak was confined to a few local farms and live chickens from the Mainland were available. She added that if there were no new developments in the spread of avian flu in the coming few days, the infection would be considered to be under control.

29. SEF further said that supply of local live chickens would resume when the wholesale market reopened on 9 February 2002, based on the following considerations-

- (a) there had been no new developments so far with the remaining 121 local farms which had not been placed under quarantine;
- (b) the Administration had put in place additional safeguards and a comprehensive surveillance system; and
- (c) the Mainland had confirmed there would be adequate supply of live chickens for Hong Kong to meet the demand for the Lunar New Year.

30. Mr Tommy CHEUNG expressed appreciation of the hard work of the Administration to control the spread of avian flu and to ensure supply of live chickens for the Lunar New Year. He suggested that in the long run, the Administration should consider providing a dedicated wholesale market for local chickens, and requiring live chickens to be transported in trucks and cages separately and not mixed with other birds. Referring to the meeting held between the Administration and the trade on 5 February 2002, Mr CHEUNG asked whether consensus had been reached with the trade that some 200 000 live chickens would be imported from the Mainland on 9 February 2002 to meet the anticipated large demand for the Lunar New Year. He was worried that the original import estimates of some 110 000 live chickens would not be sufficient and would have the effect of pushing up the retail prices.

31. SEF responded that the number available was not determined by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. She noted that the trade had originally requested to import 300 000 live chickens on 9 February 2002, and this number was much higher than the imports for Lunar New Year in previous years. She said that the Mainland had just confirmed that it would supply 190 000 live

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chickens to Hong Kong on 9 February 2002 and would continue to provide adequate live chickens to meet demands during the Lunar New Year. She said that in addition to the imported chickens, the 121 local farms which had not been placed under quarantine would also supply live chickens to meet the demand.

32. SEF said that special arrangements had been made in the past few days to station AFCD staff at the farms. They would inspect the chickens before they were loaded onto the trucks. She added that because of the substantial manpower involved, this could not be a permanent arrangement. SEF called on farm operators to carefully check the health conditions of their chickens before delivering them to the Wholesale Market. Farm operators who knowingly delivered unhealthy chickens to the Wholesale Market were not only irresponsible but would also cause serious damage to the trade and to the community.

Tightening regulatory control of local farms

33. Mrs Selina CHOW said that AFCD should be held responsible for failing to take strict enforcement against local farms which were in breach of the licensing or hygiene requirements. She commented that it appeared that the Administration had tried to convey a message at the meeting that there was no way to prevent recurrence of avian flu no matter what precautionary measures were introduced, and that the live poultry industry was doomed to disappear. Mrs CHOW said that there were only a few members of the trade who were not complying with the control measures for the prevention of avian flu. She stressed that protection of public health required concerted efforts of all parties concerned, and the Administration should assist the trade and enhance the overall hygiene standards in all local poultry farms.

34. SEF said that she could not accept that there was negligence on the part of AFCD, as the staff of AFCD and FEHD had been working very hard to control the spread of the infection. She stressed that it was difficult to prevent recurrence of avian flu if the present mode of operation of the industry did not change.

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35. SEF said that to alleviate the overcrowding in farms and in markets, the Administration considered it necessary to reduce the number of live chickens kept in these premises. SEF stressed that the Administration had no intention to wipe out the industry. However, it was necessary to upgrade the operations of the industry at the farming, retail and wholesale levels. SEF added that the Administration appreciated the difficulties faced by the industry, especially in the midst of the economic downturn. However, it was necessary to work out a long-term solution to tackle the avian flu problem with the overall interests of the community in mind. The need to safeguard public health should not be compromised.

36. DAFC supplemented that since the last outbreak of avian flu in May 2001, AFCD had been in discussion with the industry on ways to upgrade their operations. He said that most chicken farms in Hong Kong were up to standard. However, some of the local farms were small-scale and family-based operation, and these farmers were relatively old, and they lacked the means and knowledge to upgrade their operations. To avoid forcing these farmers out of business, the policy of AFCD was to provide as much assistance to them as possible to help them meet the hygiene standard.

37. DAFC said that AFCD was very concerned about the overcrowding problem of chickens in farms and had been closely monitoring the situation. He further said that in December 2001 and January 2002, AFCD had issued 22 warning letters to owners of overcrowded farms. New licensing conditions had also been introduced on 21 January 2002 setting a ceiling on the number of live chickens that could be kept, depending on the size of each poultry farm. From 21 February 2002, farmers who failed to comply with the new conditions were liable to penalty and revocation of licences. DAFC added that there was a one-month grace period to enable these farms to sell their existing stock.

38. Mrs Selina CHOW expressed dissatisfaction that AFCD introduced the new licensing conditions only in January 2002, while the first outbreak of avian flu was back in 1997. She did not agree that the enforcement of the new licensing conditions had to be further delayed by one month, as this was against the principle of safeguarding public health. She said that DAFC could not really tell what achievements AFCD had made in upgrading the operations of the industry in these years. She urged the Administration to conduct an internal review to ascertain whether there had been negligence on the part of AFCD in its regulatory control of farms.

39. DAFC explained that in recent years, AFCD had already tightened the control of poultry farms and provided training for the industry with a view to upgrading their operations. With the technical support provided by AFCD, chicken farms had installed automatic drinkers, ventilation and cleansing systems. Some farms had even installed automatic feeding systems. He said that AFCD would continue its efforts to

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help the farms improve their hygiene standard and upgrade their facilities. He assured members that he would review and tighten its regulatory control of poultry farms.

40. Mr Albert CHAN considered that having three outbreaks of avian flu in five years reflected that there was serious dereliction of duty of some government officers, and also the lack of determination on the part of the Administration to eradicate the problem. He considered that the Environment and Food Bureau (EFB), which was responsible for safeguarding public health and maintaining environmental hygiene, should demonstrate its determination to tackle the avian flu problem. Mr CHAN added that AFCD had also failed to effectively enforce regulatory control of local farms, including pig farms. He cited a media report that there had been unusual pig deaths in local farms (10 000 pigs) in the last two months. He said that the Administration had also not taken action to address the problem of illegal disposal of sewage of pig farms.

41. SEF stated that she had already explained the nature of avian flu and the importance of the trade's co-operation in ensuring the effectiveness of the surveillance system. She had also undertaken that the Administration would look into the causes of the current outbreak. In addition, FEHD and AFCD would review the avian flu surveillance system to see whether it could be strengthened or improved. She said that before such investigations were completed, Mr CHAN's allegation of dereliction of duty of government officers was unfair and totally unfounded.

42. Regarding the media report on pig deaths, SEF said that AFCD had already issued a press release clarifying that there was no sign of any increase in foot-and-mouth disease in local farms. The number of pig carcasses collected daily by FEHD had remained constant, i.e. about 250 each day. She added that foot-and-mouth disease was a common disease occurring in pigs, and pig farmers had been reminded of the need to vaccinate their pigs.

43. On disposal of sewage by pig farms, SEF said that she had on different occasions explained the difficulties faced by the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) in taking enforcement action since pig farms were located in remote areas and sewage was often illegally disposed during midnight. It was impossible for EPD staff to keep watch on the pig farms round the clock. She said that self-regulation of the trade was very important.

44. Mrs Selina CHOW said that she appreciated the Administration's efforts in ensuring the supply of live chickens for the Lunar New Year. However, she pointed out that the community wanted to know what actually had gone wrong and whether there would be a long-term solution to the problem of avian flu. Referring to the proposed precautionary measures for Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Market and the new transport arrangements as mentioned in the Administration's paper, Mrs CHOW asked whether these measures had the support of the trade. SEF responded that the arrangements were introduced to restore public confidence in local chickens

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having regard to the interests of the trade, and these measures had the support of the trade.

45. Miss CHAN Yuen-han shared the concerns raised by Mrs Selina CHOW and urged that the Administration should take active measures to promote a new culture in the industry to upgrade their operations and management practices.

Effectiveness of the surveillance system

46. Mr Michael MAK said that there were rumours that one consignment of Ching Yuen chickens was refused entry into Hong Kong as it could not pass the sampling tests at the border. He asked if there was really such a case. Mr MAK also referred to a media report that a television station had commissioned a laboratory to conduct random tests on live chickens sold in Hong Kong, and found that three out of the five samples tested had contracted avian flu virus. Mr MAK therefore had doubts on the effectiveness of the surveillance system. He asked the Administration to provide details of the sampling tests conducted for live chickens, such as the number of random samples taken for the tests and their accuracy.

47. Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) clarified that no consignment of Ching Yuen chickens had been sent back to the Mainland. She explained that there was stringent control for the import of live chickens. Each consignment of live chickens from the Mainland must be accompanied with an official health certificate confirming that the chickens had not contracted flu virus within 180 days before being exported to Hong Kong. The chickens had to be examined by veterinary officers and blood tests conducted for the chickens five days before they were exported to Hong Kong. At the Man Kam To Control Point, blood samples were also taken from the chickens for testing. The requirement was that 14 blood samples were taken from each truckload of about 200 chickens. DFEH explained that the chickens would then be delivered to Cheung Sha Wan Wholesale Market. They would be released to the retail market only after the results of the blood tests were available. She pointed out that blood samples, in addition to faecal samples, were also collected from chickens at the Wholesale Market.

48. DFEH further said that she was not in a position to comment on the media report of the private laboratory's sampling results as she did not have the details. She said that the existing avian flu surveillance system was a very comprehensive one which included conducting regular tests for samples of dead chickens taken from retail markets, and monitoring of the number of chicken deaths in farms and markets. She said that Professor Webster, an international expert on avian flu, had openly commented that the avian flu surveillance system in Hong Kong was a first-class system in the world.

49. Dr LO Wing-lok requested the Administration to provide further information on the discovery of H5N1 virus in the samples collected from the first farm infected

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recently. SEF responded that in January 2002, post-mortem examination had shown that H5N1 virus was present in three samples of dead chickens. However, there was no evidence that the H5N1 virus found in these samples would affect human health. She further said that some 1 000 blood tests and faecal tests were conducted on samples taken from chickens, and the results were available on the website of AFCD.

50. Dr LO Wing-lok further asked how the Administration would follow up on test results which showed that a strain of H5N1 virus that would not affect human health was present in samples taken from dead chickens. SEF said that the Administration would trace the source of the dead chickens and monitor the situation in markets to watch out for any unusual increase in chicken deaths.

Additional precautionary measures for inspecting local chickens

51. Mr WONG Yung-kan and Mr Tommy CHEUNG sought further information on the additional precautionary measures newly introduced for inspecting local chickens. Referring to paragraph 11(c) of the Administration's paper, Mr CHEUNG expressed concern whether the blood test requirements for chickens from local farms would delay the time for retailers to buy chickens at the Wholesale Market. SEF provided the following information -

- (a) AFCD officers would complete the blood tests for chickens within a few hours (i.e. after the chickens reached the Wholesale Market at midnight and before the chickens were sold at the laans at about 5 am). It was unlikely that the additional blood test would delay the time by which the chickens were sold to retailers.
- (b) At the Wholesale Market, the chickens would be placed at a special location and not mixed with imported chickens until they passed the health test.

52. In response to Mr WONG Yung-kan, SEF replied that based on AFCD's latest report, the health condition of chickens in the remaining 121 poultry farms which had not been placed under quarantine was satisfactory.

Segregation of chickens from local farms and from the Mainland

53. Mrs Selina CHOW asked whether the Administration had considered segregating the chickens from local farms and from the Mainland to prevent cross-infection and to facilitate tracing of the source of infection. SEF responded that it would be difficult to prevent local chickens and Mainland chickens from being mixed at retail outlets. As regards the suggestion of a mandatory labelling system for live chickens to facilitate tracing of the source of infection, SEF said that the measure could not help identify which chickens were the source of the flu virus.

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Appointing 8 February 2002 as the additional Rest Day

54. The Chairman said that some operators of chicken stalls had complained to him that they were not informed in time of the decision that 8 February would be a Rest Day. He pointed out that as the Administration only discussed with representatives of trade associations, many stall owners did not know about the additional Rest Day. As a result, some stall owners had still placed order for live chickens on 6 February and they had to cut prices to clear their stock on 7 February. The Chairman urged the Administration to improve communication with retailers. He considered that the Administration could have deferred the rest day by one day to allow time for the stall owners to clear their stock.

55. SEF responded that the additional Rest Day on 8 February 2002 was proposed by the trade at a meeting on 6 February. She said that the trade had requested to introduce the additional Rest Day as soon as possible, so that the markets could be cleansed in time and reopened before the Lunar New Year. She further said that 8 February was chosen so that retailers could catch the high volume of business on 9 February which was the weekend before the Lunar New Year.

Other issues

56. The Chairman commented that the ventilation of many FEHD markets was not satisfactory and this could be conducive to the spread of avian flu, especially if many unsold chickens were kept in the stalls. He urged the Administration to take improvement measures in this respect. The Administration noted the comment.

57. The Chairman also asked whether the Administration had identified any particular problematic retail or wholesale stalls with chickens infected with flu virus time and again. He said that FEHD should step up monitoring of those stalls. SEF said that FEHD would take necessary actions against those stalls which did not comply with the hygiene measures for prevention of avian flu.

58. The Chairman shared the view of some members that there was negligence on the part of the department(s) concerned in the regulatory control of local farms, and the number of chickens in many farms had far exceeded their capacity. DAFC responded that AFCD had already drawn up a series of interim and long-term improvement measures for local chicken farms, which would be implemented after the Lunar New Year. The measures were to rectify the overstocking problems of some chicken farms, to improve their hygiene standards and to upgrade their operations.

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59. The Chairman requested the Administration to provide a progress report to the Panel after the Lunar New Year on the Administration's discussion with chicken farmers, retailers and wholesalers on the enhanced control measures. He said that Mr Tommy CHEUNG had also suggested that a designated wholesale markets be provided for chickens from local farms. SEF responded that AFCD and FEHD had been in active discussion with the trade. AFCD would further discuss with the trade ways to improve the standards of local farms and upgrade their operations.

(Post-meeting note: The Administration had provided a progress report and a supplementary report on the developments of the avian flu incident. The papers were issued vide LC Paper Nos. CB(2) 1456 & 1538/01-02 dated 26 March 2002 and 9 April 2002 respectively.)

II. Any other business

60. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 6:35 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
12 June 2002