

For discussion
on the Special Meeting on 8 February 2002

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
AVIAN INFLUENZA INCIDENT**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the control measures taken by the Government following the recent avian influenza incident and the related follow-up actions.

Existing Surveillance Mechanism for Avian Flu

2. Since 1998, the Government has adopted a comprehensive surveillance system for avian flu. All imported chickens have to be tested at the time of importation for H5 antibody and they are not allowed for sale before the test results are available. Quarantine inspections are conducted at local farms based on the same principle. Before the chickens are released to the market, staff of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) are sent to the farms concerned to conduct tests for H5 antibody. Only those tested negative are allowed for sale. In addition, the mortality of chickens in wholesale and retail markets is monitored and faecal samples are also collected for culturing of H5 virus.

3. The entire surveillance mechanism has been further improved since the outbreak of avian flu in May last year. Major improvement measures taken include –

- (a) Implementing a rest day every month for cleansing poultry retail outlets across the territory to break the virus cycle;
- (b) Stepping up surveillance by increasing the number of blood samples taken from chickens, taking samples of dead chickens at

wholesale and retail markets for testing on a regular basis and enhancing the reporting mechanism on chicken deaths in markets;

- (c) Implementing complete segregation of live quails and live chickens at all levels to prevent the emergence of the avian flu virus which affected humans in 1997; and
- (d) Requiring separate packing of carcasses and viscera of water birds to further prevent chickens from being cross-contaminated by ducks and geese.

4. Our surveillance mechanism is comprehensive and proactive. In fact, due to this mechanism, we are able to detect the recent avian influenza incident.

An Account of the Recent Avian Influenza Incident

5. In the early morning of 1 February, AFCD detected a batch of suspect chickens during an inspection at Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market. An investigation was conducted immediately. The consignment of about 1,500 chickens was then transported from the wholesale market to the New Territories North Animal Management Centre. Some 120 chickens died during detention. AFCD immediately took blood and offal samples from the chickens for testing and the whole batch of chickens was destroyed. AFCD traced the chickens to the farm of origin in Kam Tin and immediately stopped the farm from sending out 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. Since a large number of chickens were found dead on two consecutive days from 1 February to 2 February, AFCD started to depopulate chickens in the farm on 3 February. The exercise was completed on that day and some 100,000 chickens were slaughtered.

6. We were highly concerned about this incident. So we stepped up surveillance at once in local farms as well as the wholesale and retail markets and collected samples for laboratory tests. On 4 February, two

farm owners in Kam Tin reported to AFCD that there were problems with their chickens. Subsequent investigation confirmed that one of the two farms was infected. The farm in question was therefore closed and all chickens there were destroyed. As for the other one, only a small number of chickens were found dead and investigation by AFCD continued. On 5 February, AFCD confirmed that the farm under investigation the day before was infected. Besides, in another chicken farm in Hung Shui Kiu, the chickens there were also affected. These farms were closed instantly and all chickens were slaughtered. Some 80,000 chickens were destroyed in these three farms.

7. Since the virus found in the farms in the Kam Tin area might spread, we decided to close all farms in that area and prohibited the supply of chickens from those farms to the market. In addition, there were some problems with the chickens at another two farms outside the Kam Tin area (one in Pak Sha and the other in Lau Fau Shan). Again, these two farms were shut down and placed under quarantine. As at 7 February, a total of 25 farms had been closed, including the above four farms which had been found infected. No further cases of infection were found in other chicken farms.

8. Chickens in the wholesale and retail markets in general do not show sign of disease so far though we did find unhealthy chickens at individual stalls in several markets. With the help of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), these stall owners had their live poultry destroyed and their stalls thoroughly cleansed and disinfected. Up to February 7, we have destroyed some 6,000 live birds from 13 chicken stalls in the Tsuen Wan Market and 9 chicken stalls in other markets. As for the wholesale market, no sign of unusual chicken deaths has been detected.

9. The Expert Working Group on Avian Influenza held a meeting earlier to discuss and assess the incident. The Expert Group was of the view that there was no evidence at this stage to show that the virus affecting the chickens was the same as the one that affected humans in 1997. The Expert Group also considered that the control measures taken at present, i.e., closing down chicken farms and stalls as soon as the chickens

there showed signs of disease, was appropriate and effective. The group also remarked that as revealed from the results of regular sampling tests and market surveillance, the implementation of the monthly Rest Day proved to be a very effective measure in breaking the cycle of any virus that might have intruded in the market. As such, the Expert Group recommended that in view of the infection found in local farms, action should be taken as soon as possible to introduce an additional Rest Day this month. The same request was also put forth by the trade.

10. After FEHD's consultation with the trade, we decided to implement an additional Rest Day across the territory on February 8. In fact, the retail outlets have started clearing their stock on February 6 and since the afternoon of that day, no further cases of unusual chicken deaths have been found.

Further Actions

11. In view of the recent incident, AFCD has decided to implement the following new measures with immediate effect to keep chickens of local farms under surveillance—

- (a) During the peak season for sale of live chickens prior to the Lunar New Year, AFCD officers will be deployed to oversee on site the loading and transportation of chickens so as to further prevent chickens sneaking in the market without being inspected;
- (b) All chickens from local farms must be distributed for sale at retail outlets via the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market;
- (c) In addition to the test for H5 antibody conducted no more than five days before local chickens are released to the market, an additional blood test should be conducted at the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market before the chickens are sold to retail outlets. Only chickens that have passed the tests are allowed for sale. This practice is the same as the current

quarantine procedures adopted for chickens imported from the Mainland;

- (d) When chickens are delivered to the wholesale market, AFCD staff will verify the farm of origin, the number of chickens in each batch and the relevant health certificates before the chickens are allowed to be unloaded;
- (e) Chickens from local farms should be directed to a designated area in the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market and are not allowed to be mixed with imported chickens until the second blood test results are available;
- (f) AFCD has reached a consensus with farmers that each vehicle should transport consignments of chickens from one single local farm only to reduce the probability of cross-contamination; and
- (g) When the market reopens, all vehicles used for transporting chickens from local farms must be cleansed thoroughly in the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market before they are allowed to collect clean cages for transportation of chickens from local farms to the wholesale market.

In addition to implementing the above measures, AFCD and FEHD will review the entire surveillance system to identify other areas of improvement. We will also review the implementation of the system to identify any loophole that must be removed.

Environment and Food Bureau
7 February 2002