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**Meeting of Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
on 27 May 2002**

Background Paper prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

Measures to control avian flu

Purpose

This paper summarises the discussions by Members since 2000 on measures to control avian flu.

Background

2. The first case of human infection of the H5N1 virus in Hong Kong was confirmed in August 1997. It was not until 27 December 1997 that a large number of chickens in a local chicken farm in Yuen Long and the wholesale market in Cheung Sha Wan Wholesale Market were found to be infected by the virus. As the spread of the virus among live chickens was rapid, the Administration decided to slaughter all chickens in Hong Kong on 29 December 1997. There were a total of 18 confirmed cases of human infection of H5N1 virus in Hong Kong as at February 1998.

3. Since August 1997, the Department of Health had worked closely with experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta to trace the source of the virus and to ascertain the methods of transmission. The experts had advised that the H5N1 virus was most likely transmitted from migratory water fowl to live poultry and was then passed on to humans. Pending the investigation outcome of the confirmed infection cases, the import of live ducks and geese from the Mainland had been temporarily suspended to avoid cross-infection of H5N1 among live poultry in local farms, wholesale and retail markets.

4. The Administration had subsequently worked out a quarantine system with the Mainland on the import of live chickens to Hong Kong. Under the system, only chicken farms which were licensed and monitored by the Animal and Plant Quarantine Services in the Mainland were allowed to export live chickens to Hong Kong. Chickens for export to Hong Kong must be segregated from other flocks in the licensed farms for five days and tested negative for H5 infection before they were exported. These chickens must also be clinically examined on the day of export and be issued a health certificate for this purpose. The health certificate was inspected at the entry point and samples were taken from each consignment for blood test. The consignment would be released for distribution into the market only if the sample test results were satisfactory. All birds including water fowls were subject to the same import control arrangements.

5. Thorough cleansing and disinfection of local farms, wholesale and retail markets were carried out before resumption of import of live chickens from the Mainland in 1998. The Administration indicated that a long-term segregation policy for the farming, transportation, slaughtering and trading of live chickens and water fowls at all levels would be formulated.

6. The Panel on Health Services discussed the issues relating to H5N1 virus at its meetings on 31 December 1997, 12 January 1998 and 9 February 1998. A motion on "Improving the mechanisms for managing infectious diseases and imported livestock quarantine" was passed by the Provisional Legislative Council (LegCo) on 21 January 1998.

Discussion by Members since the first LegCo term

Avian flu incident in May 2001

7. In May 2001, there was another outbreak of avian flu which killed a large number of chickens in ten markets. The Administration decided to destroy some 1.2 million chickens, ducks, geese and pigeons in the retail and wholesale markets and in local farms. The purpose was to arrest the spread of avian flu amongst the chicken population and also to prevent the possibility of these viruses re-assorting and giving rise to a new one which might affect human beings. The affected trades were provided with compensation and/or financial assistance.

8. At its meeting on 21 May 2001, the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene discussed with the Administration measures to control the spread of avian flu and to protect public health. The Administration explained that the strain of virus discovered in May 2001 was not the same virus that affected humans in Hong Kong in 1997. However, to ensure that the virus was eradicated, all retail outlets were closed for a few weeks to enable thorough cleansing and disinfection to be carried out. The Mainland authorities were also requested to stop sending live poultry to Hong Kong during that period.

9. The Panel was not satisfied with the Administration's proposed compensation package for the trades affected by the mass cull. At its meeting on 21 May 2001, the Panel passed a motion urging the Administration to provide compensation to all employees of the live poultry trades which were affected by the mass cull and suspension of business. A revised compensation and financial assistance package was subsequently passed by the Finance Committee on 1 June 2001.

10. The sale of live chickens at retail outlets was resumed on 16 June 2001. The Panel held a further meeting, jointly with the Panel on Housing on 18 June 2001, to discuss with the Administration the monitoring measures to prevent recurrence of avian flu, as well as measures to improve the hygiene conditions and environment of public markets. The Panel noted that additional surveillance measures and a new set of hygiene guidelines for the wholesale and retail markets were put in place in consultation with the trade.

11. The Administration also informed the Panel of the intention to prohibit the transportation and sale of live quails together with live chickens, in order to prevent re-assortment of viruses carried by these birds to form the lethal virus that affected humans in 1997. To effect the segregation policy, the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Amendment) Regulation 2001, the Public Health (Animal and Birds) (Animal Traders) (Amendment) Regulation 2001 and the Food Business (Amendment) Regulation 2001 were tabled in Council on 31 October 2001. A subcommittee was set up by LegCo to examine these subsidiary legislation. As members had different views on certain segregation measures and the proposed penalty level, the Administration and Hon Fred LI Wah-ming (Chairman of the Subcommittee) moved a number of amendments to the relevant Regulations to address members' concern. The Regulations were passed, with amendments moved by the Administration and Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, at the Council meeting on 5 December 2001.

Avian flu incident in February 2002

12. In early February 2002, there were unusual chicken deaths and signs of problem chickens in a few farms in Kam Tin area. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department decided to close all the 25 farms in Kam Tin (and Pak Sha) area, and slaughter all the chickens in the two farms which were found infected with avian flu. No further cases of infection were found in other chicken farms.

13. Chickens in the wholesale and retail markets in general did not show signs of disease in February 2002, although unhealthy chickens were found at individual stalls in several markets. As a precautionary measure, the live poultry kept in these stalls were destroyed, and these stalls were thoroughly cleansed and disinfected.

14. Having assessed the situation, the Expert Group on Avian Flu was of the view that there was no evidence that the virus affecting the chickens was the same as the one that affected humans in 1997. However, to break the cycle of any virus that might have intruded into the markets, an additional Rest Day was appointed on 8 February 2002 for thorough cleansing and disinfection of all market stalls.

15. According to the Administration, a total of 25 farms were depopulated with some 900,000 chickens in these farms destroyed up to March 2002.

16. The Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene held a special meeting on 8 February 2002 to receive a briefing from the Administration on the avian flu incident and the additional control measures introduced. Members expressed serious concern as to why there were two outbreaks in less than 12 months, in spite of the comprehensive surveillance system put in place to detect avian flu. Some members also expressed concern whether the compensation policy for slaughtered chickens had induced farm operators and/or stall-holders not to comply with all the hygienic measures for the control of avian flu.

17. The Panel urged the Administration to seriously consider -

- (a) investigating into the causes of the outbreak and working out long-term solutions to prevent recurrence of avian flu;
- (b) tightening regulatory control of local farms and taking action against those farms which kept chickens far in excess of the permitted capacity;

- (c) taking additional precautionary measures for local chickens and separating them from imported chickens/other poultry to prevent cross-infection; and
- (d) reviewing the existing surveillance system and stepping up monitoring of wholesale and retail markets to ensure that they complied with all hygienic measures introduced for the control of avian flu.

18. The Administration has provided two supplementary reports to the Panel on the improvement measures taken. As one measure to stop the spread of the virus, the Administration has introduced a vaccination programme for about 400,000 chickens at Pak Sha farms. The Administration has also identified areas where bio-security of local farms can be improved.

19. The Administration has appointed an investigation team to establish causes leading to the current outbreak in local farms, and to recommend measures to reduce the likelihood of such incidents recurring in future. As members of the investigation team had to attend the 5th International Symposium on Avian Flu held in Georgia in mid April 2002, the investigation report was delivered to the Environment and Food Bureau in mid May 2002. The Panel will further discuss with the Administration the investigation findings and the recommendations to control avian flu at its meeting on 27 May 2002.

Relevant papers

20. A list of the relevant papers and documents is in the **Appendix** for members' easy reference. The papers/documents are available on the Research and Library Information System and the Council's website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr01-02/english/panels/fseh/general/fseh0102.htm>.

Relevant Papers/Documents

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Papers/Motion Passed/Council Question</u>
Provisional Legislative Council	21 January 1998	Motion on "Improving the mechanisms for managing infectious diseases and imported livestock quarantine" moved by Hon CHAN Wing-chan
Legislative Council	6 June 2001	Motion on "The avian flu incident" moved by Hon WONG Yung-kan
Panel on Health Services	31 December 1997	Administration's paper on "H5N1 virus" (Chinese version only) Minutes of meeting (PLC Paper No. CB(2) 1130)
	12 January 1998	Administration's paper - PLC Paper No. CB(2) 821(03) Minutes of meeting (PLC Paper No. CB(2) 1280)
	9 February 1998	Minutes of meeting (PLC Paper No. CB(2) 1447)
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	21 May 2001	Administration's paper - Paper No. CB(2) 1629/00-01(01) Minutes of meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2) 2320/00-01)
	18 June 2001 (Joint meeting with Housing Panel)	Administration's paper Nos. CB(2) 1852/00-01(01) & (02) Minutes of meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2) 333/01-02)

	10 July 2001	Administration's paper Nos. CB(2) 2065/00-01(01), (02) & (03) Minutes of meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2) 458/01-02)
	8 February 2002	Administration's paper - Paper No. CB(2) 1105/01-02(01) Report on the Recent Avian Influenza Incident (LC Paper No. CB(2) 1456/01-02(01)) Supplementary Report on the Recent Avian Influenza Incident (LC Paper No. CB(2) 1538/01-02(01))