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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Minutes of special meeting
held on Friday, 30 January 2004 at 11:45 am
in Conference Room B of the Legislative Council Building

Members present : Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP (Chairman)
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon WONG Yung-kan
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung
Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP
Dr Hon LO Wing-lok, JP

Members attending : Hon Mrs Selina CHOW LIANG Shuk-ye, GBS, JP
Hon CHAN Kwok-keung, JP
Hon SIN Chung-kai
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Dr Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying
Hon IP Kwok-him, JP

Member absent : Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung, BBS

Public officers attending : Dr YEOH Eng-kiong, JP
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

Mrs Carrie YAU
Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene)
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Mr Gregory LEUNG
Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene

Dr S P MAK
Deputy Director (Food and Public Health)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Dr P Y LAM
Director of Health

Mr S P LAU
Acting Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

Clerk in attendance : Mrs Constance LI
Chief Council Secretary (2)5

Staff in attendance : Ms Amy WONG
Senior Council Secretary (2)1

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I Recent outbreaks of avian influenza in the neighbouring Asian region
[LC Paper No. CB(2) 986/03-04(01)]
[LC Paper No. CB(2) 1138/03-04(01)]

The Chairman expressed regret that the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) had held a press conference on avian influenza before briefing Members on the matter. He said that the Government had been urged time and again to brief Members on important matters before briefing the media. He hoped SHWF would improve communication with the Panel and brief the Panel on important announcements before briefing the media. SHWF explained that the media briefing was held this morning because there had been wide public concern and many media enquiries about avian influenza after his return from an inter-governmental conference in Bangkok the night before.

Measures to prevent avian influenza

2. Referring to the recent outbreaks of avian influenza in neighbouring countries and places, SHWF said that it was a very serious matter with so many countries

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affected over such a short period of time. As the extent of the outbreak in the region was quite large in birds and poultry, the Government was now reviewing existing measures and procedures to see what step-up measures Hong Kong could take to prevent avian influenza from coming in. SHWE further said that there was the danger of the introduction of the virus through migratory birds and wild birds into the local poultry population. There was also the risk of introduction of the virus through imported live poultry.

3. SHWE informed members that after discussion with the relevant government departments, the following measures would be taken immediately to prevent the introduction of the virus into Hong Kong -

- (a) admission into Mai Po Nature Reserve and the walk-in aviaries in recreational parks would be temporarily suspended until the situation had stabilized;
- (b) all poultry retailers would be required to wear protective gear when handling live poultry, and non-compliance would be regarded as breaches of the tenancy agreement/licensing conditions. The tenancy or licence would be terminated if there was repeated offence after verbal warning;
- (c) poultry traders were asked to temporarily suspend importation of chickens to prevent over-supply and overcrowding of chickens in the markets;
- (d) Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) would stop issuing approval for local farms to release chickens to the retail markets (those already issued approval could still release chickens within the next few days); and
- (e) the surveillance programmes would be strengthened to ensure that all live chickens imported from the Mainland came from authorized farms and had been vaccinated against avian influenza.

Importation of live poultry

4. Dr LO Wing-lok asked whether the measures included banning the importation of live poultry from the Mainland. He said that safeguarding public health should have priority over economic and political concerns.

5. SHWE responded that Government had requested poultry traders to suspend importation of chicken into markets on a voluntary basis, in view of the sluggish demand of chickens and piling up of live chickens in markets as this would increase the risk of poultry infection.

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6. Dr LO Wing-lok said that Government's measures to prevent avian influenza were rather passive. He asked whether there was a mechanism to ensure that the poultry imported was not from provinces with avian influenza outbreaks.

7. SHWF responded that there was a mechanism in place to ensure that the chicken imported was safe. Only chickens that had been vaccinated against the H5N1 virus and came from the authorized poultry farms in the Mainland would be exported to Hong Kong. There was also a system to check the effectiveness of the vaccination of chickens. Random tests were conducted to ensure that the imported chickens were free from the H5 virus and had antibodies against it.

8. Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) added that given their huge investment in their farms, Mainland poultry farmers who had the right to export chickens to Hong Kong would not risk losing their licence by exporting any infected chickens to Hong Kong. The Mainland quarantine authorities would check each batch of chickens exported to Hong Kong, and security bands would be applied to the trucks transporting the chickens. It would be difficult for the traders to change the chickens during transportation.

9. In reply to the Chairman, SHWF said that Government had asked both the wholesalers and retailers to suspend importation of chickens for the time being. He added that it was not necessary to impose a complete ban of all poultry imports from the Mainland because there were no cases of avian influenza in Guangdong.

10. Dr LO Wing-lok asked whether Government had legislative power to require poultry traders to suspend importation of chickens and whether there was sufficient manpower for enforcement.

11. SHWF said that all along the importation of live chicken from the Mainland was subject to a set of agreed conditions -

- (a) only authorized chicken farms in the Mainland could export chicken to Hong Kong;
- (b) the imported chicken must be free from avian influenza; and
- (c) the imported chicken must be vaccinated against the H5N1 virus.

12. Mr Michael MAK criticised Government for not imposing a ban on all chickens from the Mainland. He said that the priority should be safeguarding public health, and Government should not repeat the mistake made last year in the handling of the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). He considered that Government had been passive by requesting poultry traders not to import chickens on a voluntary basis. He added that to allay public concern, Government should ban all chicken imports from the Mainland, and there should be sufficient monitoring of the

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outbreaks in the Mainland. He asked whether the decision of not imposing a ban of all chicken imports from the Mainland was based on any agreement between the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and the Guangdong authorities concerning the volume of poultry imports into Hong Kong.

13. SHWF disagreed that Government had been passive in responding to the recent outbreaks of avian influenza in neighbouring places including the Mainland. He said that Government had always given top priority to safeguarding public health in handling the SARS outbreak and preventing avian influenza. He further said that despite recent outbreaks of avian influenza in neighbouring places, there had not been any H5N1 case in the poultry in Hong Kong because Hong Kong had taken effective precautionary measures to prevent avian influenza. DFEH added that HKSAR Government did not have any agreement with the Mainland authorities on the number of chickens to be imported into Hong Kong.

14. Mr Andrew CHENG queried the Government's decision of not banning chicken imports from all parts of the Mainland while a complete ban was imposed on other infected countries such as Japan. He considered that such a differential treatment was based on political considerations and not on equity principle. He said that as the effectiveness of the vaccination programme for chickens against H5N1 had yet to be ascertained, HKSAR Government should ban all chicken imports from the Mainland.

15. Miss CHOY So-yuk expressed support for banning all chicken imports from the Mainland in order to safeguard public health. She considered it necessary for the Government to adopt stringent measures to prevent an outbreak of avian influenza in Hong Kong.

16. SHWF explained that it was not necessary to ban chicken imports from Guangdong at present because there were already specific health requirements and surveillance measures for poultry imports from Guangdong. He said that all chickens imported from Guangdong had to comply with the health requirements of Hong Kong and were safe to eat. He stressed that Government's present measures were not based on political considerations. He added that Government would closely monitor the developments in neighbouring countries and the situation in local farms, and would strengthen or adjust its measures accordingly.

17. Mr SIN Chung-kai asked under what circumstances Government would impose a ban on chicken imports from all parts of the Mainland. SHWF responded that if there was an outbreak of avian influenza in Guangdong, the Government would certainly ban all chicken imports from the Mainland.

18. Mr SIN Chung-kai expressed concern that Hong Kong might not be alerted of outbreaks of avian influenza in Guangdong, as such information might be treated as state secrets and could not be reported by the local authorities.

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19. SHWF said that at the Bangkok conference on avian influenza, both he and Mainland's Deputy Minister of Agriculture agreed that there should be closer liaison between Hong Kong and the Mainland in monitoring the avian influenza situation. If there was an outbreak of avian influenza in the Mainland, Hong Kong would be notified at the earliest possible time. SHWF further said that the Central Government of the People's Republic of China was deeply concerned about the spread of avian influenza and had instructed all provinces to report any outbreaks to the Central Government within 24 hours.

20. Mrs Selina CHOW queried whether Government was trying to avoid the issue of compensation by not imposing a ban of chicken imports into Hong Kong. She said that it was not fair to the poultry trade as there had been a drastic decrease in the sale volume of live poultry, and there was stocking-up of chickens in markets after the recent outbreaks of avian influenza in neighbouring places.

21. SHWF explained that the suspension of poultry imports should not only be targetted at the Mainland, and supply from local farms should also be reduced to enable the market to absorb the current supply and to alleviate hygiene problems at markets. He said that there were measures to monitor the health conditions of chicken in local farms. If the over-stocking situation at markets improved and the chicken from local farms satisfied the health requirements for sale, supply of chicken from local farms could resume.

22. In response to Mrs Selina CHOW, SHWF said that Government had started discussing with poultry traders the impact of the temporary suspension of chicken supply to the market.

23. The Chairman asked about the number of live chickens now stocked up in the markets. DFEH said there were about 220 000 live chickens in the markets, and about 90 000, 80 000 and 50 000 new chickens (including both imported and local chickens) had been made available to the market in the last three days.

24. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that although the demand for chickens by restaurants had been relatively stable, he agreed that, in view of the plunged demand at markets, there should be temporary suspension of poultry importation. He urged Government to immediately discuss with the poultry trade and publicize the whole package of measures affecting local farms, poultry transportation, and wholesale and retail trades. He also asked whether Government would step up inspections of poultry imports at border control points.

25. DFEH said that inspection rate of chickens imported into Hong Kong had already been increased by 25% from 14 chickens per truck to 18 per truck. Arrangements were also being made with the Mainland authorities for FEHD officers to conduct inspections on the chicken farms in the Mainland. SHWF said that the step-up measures against avian influenza would be announced as soon as possible.

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Chilled poultry

26. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked whether Government would require the head and feet of all chilled poultry to be removed for importation into Hong Kong. Miss CHOY So-yuk added that the respiratory tract of poultry might carry the H5 virus and should be removed for safe consumption.

27. DFEH said that the issue had been discussed at previous meetings of the Panel. The H5 virus of an infected poultry would be found mainly in the viscera, not the neck, and for chilled poultry from the Mainland, there were already requirements for the viscera to be handled and packed separately from the carcasses to avoid contamination. Since there was relatively small risk of the neck of chilled poultry carrying H5 virus, there were insufficient justifications from the health angle to require the removal of the head and feet of chilled poultry for importation into Hong Kong.

Vaccination against avian influenza

28. Mr Andrew CHENG said that some microbiologists were of the view that with the rapid mutation of the H5 virus, the vaccination programme might not be very effective in preventing avian influenza.

29. SHWF assured Members that the vaccine being used for chickens was still effective. AFCD had requested Vietnam to provide the H5 virus specimen for study, and Government would conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness of the vaccine jointly with the University of Hong Kong.

30. Mr LEUNG Fu-wah said that during the Panel's recent duty visit to Japan, the Japanese officials had informed the delegation of the Panel that according to experts in Japan, vaccination of chicken could not prevent avian influenza. In the recent avian influenza outbreak in a farm in Yamaguchi Prefecture, the strategy adopted by Japan was to kill all chickens in the affected farm and to prohibit the movement (i.e. release) of all poultry (and eggs) from farms within a radius of 30 kilometers of the infected farm. He asked why Hong Kong held a different view from the Japanese experts by emphasizing the effectiveness of the vaccination programme for chickens.

31. Acting Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (Atg DAFC) said that the vaccine for chickens in Hong Kong had proven effective. Atg DAFC explained that different countries adopted different strategies for preventing avian influenza having regard to their own circumstances. He further explained that in Hong Kong, a series of control and surveillance measures had been adopted to guard against avian influenza, and vaccination of chickens was to enhance their resistance to the H5 virus. To enable early detection of the H5 virus, there were some sentinel chickens without inoculation in each batch of chickens in local farms. AFCD and the University of Hong Kong would closely monitor the situation and would change the

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vaccine if mutation of the virus was so significant that the current vaccine became ineffective.

32. Atg DAFC further said that apart from vaccination, biosecurity measures had been introduced in local farms to prevent wild birds from entering the farms, and farm workers had to wear protective gear at work. There was also a surveillance programme on the virus in the droppings of wild birds, and "Rest Days" were introduced for wholesale and retail poultry markets to enable thorough cleansing and disinfection to be carried out in these markets.

33. Mr IP Kwok-him asked whether and when the Government would require poultry traders to receive vaccination. He said that it would take two weeks for the vaccine to be effective.

34. SHWF said that poultry traders in places with outbreaks of avian influenza should receive vaccination. However, as there was no avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong, poultry traders could only be encouraged to receive vaccination.

35. Director of Health (DH) supplemented that World Health Organization was initially of the view that people who had the chance to be infected (i.e. medical doctors and traders/workers who had close contact with poultry) in places with avian influenza outbreaks should receive vaccination. He explained that the vaccination was against influenza but not H5N1. As there was no avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong, it was not necessary for poultry traders in Hong Kong to receive such vaccination. However, Government was open-minded and would consider the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Immunization (ACI) in taking a decision on vaccination.

36. Mr IP Kwok-him said that Government should actively encourage people with high risks to receive vaccination. The Chairman asked whether Government had the authority to require all poultry workers to receive vaccination.

37. DH responded that there was no legislative provision on mandatory vaccination of people in Hong Kong. He said that Government could only encourage people to receive the vaccination.

38. Ms LI Fung-ying asked whether there were any contingency plans in case there was an outbreak of avian influenza in Hong Kong. She also asked whether Government would strengthen publicity to enhance public awareness of the precautionary measures against avian influenza.

39. SHWF responded that the Hospital Authority and the Department of Health were reviewing existing strategies and were formulating measures to deal with any possible avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong. He undertook to discuss the contingency plans with Members at a later stage.

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Mechanism for dealing with avian influenza

40. Ms CHOY So-yuk commented that the measures for tackling avian influenza outbreak were not comprehensive enough. She urged that Government should devise a mechanism which would be activated automatically in case there was an outbreak of avian influenza in Hong Kong. She suggested that the public and government officials should be made aware of the actions to be taken under different scenarios in case of an outbreak.

41. Miss CHOY further said that to allay public concerns, imports of poultry eggs should also be suspended for the time being although the chance of getting infected through consumption of table eggs should be slim. She added that if a massive cull of poultry was to be carried out in the event of an avian influenza outbreak, the poultry carcasses should be incinerated and not buried.

42. SHWF stressed that safeguarding public health had always been Government's primary concern. He said that Government had taken prompt and decisive measures to prevent the introduction of the H5 virus into Hong Kong. He further said that he had discussed with the Chief Executive and held inter-departmental meetings this morning to review the current strategies in view of the evolving avian influenza situation in the region. Due to limitation of time, it was not possible for him to detail all the measures at this meeting, but he would be pleased to report to Members at future meetings. He reiterated that a total ban on poultry imports from the Mainland would be imposed once avian influenza hit Guangdong.

43. Regarding the mechanism to handle avian influenza outbreaks and the arrangements for massive cull, SHWF said that the relevant departments were working out the details and these would be announced as soon as possible.

44. Dr YEUNG Sum said that there had been immense public concern about the recent outbreaks of avian influenza in the region, and people were worried about possible introduction of the virus through poultry imports. He urged Government to take prompt actions to ban all poultry imports from the Mainland.

45. DH informed Members that two Orders had been gazetted this morning to add Influenza A (H5) to the list of notifiable infectious diseases with immediate effect. The effect would be that medical doctors had to report all suspected cases of the disease to DH. Arrangements had also been made to step up health checks at the border control points, and announcements would be made at the border points on the step-up measures. In addition, a joint clinical team had been set up with the Guangdong and Macao authorities to examine any suspected avian influenza in humans, and to share specimens for examination in such cases. A mechanism was also in place that if there was any suspected or confirmed avian influenza case, the other parties should be notified at the earliest possible time. In this connection,

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Department of Health was also discussing with private doctors ways to strengthen the monitoring of H5N1.

46. Dr LAW Chi-kwong said that although there was no human-to-human infection at present, he was concerned about the possible mutation of H5 virus. He asked whether the law would be amended so that the infected person and his family members could be put under quarantine when necessary.

47. SHWF responded that with the inclusion of Influenza A (H5) in the list of notifiable infectious diseases, Government would have the authority to place infected persons and people with whom they had close contact under quarantine if necessary.

48. Mr Andrew CHENG proposed a motion that Government should immediately ban all poultry imports from places/countries with avian influenza outbreaks. Dr LO Wing-lok, Mr WONG Yung-kan and Mr Tommy CHEUNG separately proposed amendments to the proposed motion. The following motion moved by Mr Andrew CHENG, as amended by Dr LO Wing-lok, Mr WONG Yung-kan and Mr Tommy CHEUNG, was unanimously passed -

"That in view of the successive outbreaks of avian influenza in various Asian countries and for the sake of safeguarding public health, the Panel urges the Government to stop with immediate effect the processing of all applications for the import of live poultry, poultry carcasses and poultry eggs to Hong Kong from countries and places with avian influenza outbreak, announce immediately a comprehensive crisis-handling mechanism to deal with problems arising from avian influenza and the follow-up work, and discuss with the relevant trades the handling of existing live chickens in Hong Kong."

49. SHWF said that Government would seriously consider the motion passed by the Panel. To enable Government to pursue the matter, he sought members' views on the proposed duration for the import ban and the rationale behind such recommendation.

50. Dr LO Wing-lok suggested that the ban should at least last for two weeks. In the meantime, Government should send officials to Guangdong to ensure that the present inspection and surveillance system for live poultry imported to Hong Kong were effective. If the situation in the region improved after two weeks, Government could resume supply of live chickens to Hong Kong.

51. Mr Andrew CHENG expressed support for Dr LO's suggestion. He pointed out that the avian influenza outbreaks in 1997 and 1998 lasted about two months on each occasion. He suggested that Government should keep the situation under review and report any developments/changes to the Panel. Mr Michael MAK and Miss CHOY So-yuk expressed similar views.

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52. Mr Tommy CHEUNG suggested that Government could make reference to the following factors in deciding when to lift the import ban -

- (a) whether the avian influenza situation in neighbouring countries was under control;
- (b) the extent of public concern about the importation and consumption of poultry products; and
- (c) the stock level and demand of chicken in Hong Kong.

53. In concluding the discussion, the Chairman said that although there was at present no avian influenza case in Hong Kong, Government should put in place comprehensive measures to guard against and to deal with any possible outbreak in Hong Kong. He urged Government to take necessary actions on the motion passed by the Panel and report the progress to the Panel in about two weeks.

Admin 54. SHWF reiterated that Government was committed to safeguarding public health. He agreed to keep members posted of developments.

II Any other business

55. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 1:20 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
18 March 2004