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the Administration)

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Minutes of special meeting
held on Wednesday, 12 February 2004 at 9 am
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)
Hon WONG Yung-kan
Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung, BBS
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung
Dr Hon LO Wing-lok, JP
- Member attending** : Hon Mrs Selina CHOW LIANG Shuk-ye, GBS, JP
- Member absent** : Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP
- Public officers attending** : Mrs Carrie YAU
Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
- Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Food & Environmental Hygiene)
- Mr Gregory LEUNG
Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene
- Mr Thomas CHAN
Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

Mr C W LAI
Assistant Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation
(Inspection and Quarantine)

Dr Thomas TSANG
Consultant (Community Medicine) (Communicable Diseases)
Department of Health

Clerk in attendance : Mr Paul WOO
Senior Council Secretary (2)3

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

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I. Re-scheduling of meetings

Members agreed that the regular meetings originally scheduled for 24 February and 23 March 2004 be re-scheduled to 25 February and 19 March 2004 respectively from 10:45 am to 12:45 pm.

II. Updated measures against outbreak of avian influenza in Hong Kong

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 1306/03-04(01)]

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 1332/03-04(01)]

2. Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (PS(HWF)) delivered a power-point presentation on "Preventive and contingency measures to combat avian influenza in Hong Kong". She informed members that there would be adequate supply of protective gear for the operation staff if a massive culling of chickens was considered necessary.

(Post-meeting note: The revised presentation materials had been circulated to members on 13 February 2004 vide LC Paper No. CB(2) 1332/03-04(01))

Outbreak of avian influenza (AI) in Vietnam

3. The Chairman expressed regret that the Administration did not provide any update on the viral outbreak in Vietnam since the last Panel meeting held on 30 January 2004.

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4. PS(HWF) explained that the release of information about the situation in Vietnam was somewhat confusing. Meanwhile, a Hong Kong team of specialists/experts had arrived in Vietnam to exchange views and experiences on treatment of AI infections with the relevant authorities there. She undertook to follow-up the matter and report progress to the Panel.

Vaccination against AI

5. The Chairman asked whether the current vaccine used was effective in guarding against the AI virus found in Vietnam. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked about the effective period of the vaccine and whether the vaccine would leave any drug residue in the chickens.

6. PS(HWF) responded that the vaccine was produced by Holland and manufactured in Mexico. It was used for protection against all strains of the H5 virus. Although the World Health Organisation (WHO) did not have evidence to prove that the vaccination was 100% effective against AI, WHO was satisfied with the effectiveness of the vaccine. Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DAFC) said that according to the manufacturer, the vaccine would be suitable for use in 40 years for prevention of the H5 virus. He said that the effectiveness of the vaccine in guarding against the virus found in Vietnam would have to be further examined.

7. DAFC further informed members that countries which were exporters of chickens were now generally more willing to have their chickens vaccinated. Since June 2003, all chickens in Hong Kong were vaccinated against the H5 virus. Every chicken would be vaccinated twice. The chickens would receive the second dose of vaccination within 30 to 38 days. The vaccine would be absorbed within two weeks after vaccination. The chickens sold in the market would be safe for consumption because those were the big and medium-sized chickens of about 75 to 100 days' old.

8. Regarding the concern that vaccinated chickens might carry the AI virus, DAFC said that AI virus had never been found in the faeces of the vaccinated chickens since the launch of the vaccination in June 2003. The situation would be kept under monitoring.

9. Dr LO Wing-lok opined that the Administration should conduct more in-depth research on the effect of vaccination of chickens against AI, so as to dispel any unnecessary fear about the impact on the health of consumers.

Ban on importation of live poultry

10. Mr Andrew CHENG pointed out that the Mainland authorities had stated on several occasions that the mass media in Hong Kong had exaggerated the seriousness of the AI outbreaks on the Mainland. He said that as poultry farmers in the Mainland would suffer from the ban on importation of live poultry from the Mainland to Hong

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Kong, the Mainland authorities might pressurize Hong Kong to lift the import ban without sufficient regard to the concern of the people in Hong Kong. He asked how the Administration would balance the interests of Hong Kong and the Mainland in dealing with this matter. The Chairman asked whether the Administration could give assurance that the interests of Hong Kong would come first in its consideration.

11. PS(HWF) assured members that public health was always the prime concern of the Administration in considering the issue of importation of live poultry from outside Hong Kong, and that the Administration would ensure that when live chickens were available for sale in the market, they were completely safe for consumption.

12. Mr YEUNG Yiu-chung considered that there should not be an over-exaggeration about a possible conflict of interest between Hong Kong and the Mainland. Referring to paragraph 6 in the Administration's paper, he asked about the criteria used by the Administration in imposing the ban on the importation of live birds and poultry meat from AI affected places, and whether the ban would apply to imports of live birds from all places in the Mainland.

13. PS(HWF) responded that the scope of the ban depended on the actual outbreak situation in the places concerned. He pointed out that at the start of the outbreak in the United States (US), only imports of poultry from the state of Delaware were banned because the H7 virus was considered to be a low pathogenic AI and the outbreak only affected one farm in Delaware. However, with the occurrence of a second AI case in Delaware the day before this meeting, the Administration had decided to temporarily cease processing applications for the importation of live birds and poultry meat from the US.

14. The Chairman said that he supported a total ban on import of poultry from US. He asked whether there were any objective international criteria for the Administration to base upon in making that decision.

15. PS(HWF) responded that there were no comprehensive guidelines available from the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) to deal with an outbreak situation. She said that if the US could provide more detailed information on the H7 AI virus found in Delaware, the possibility of limiting the ban to only imports from the state of Delaware might be considered.

16. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked when the importation of live chickens from the Mainland into Hong Kong could resume. He pointed out that according to the Mainland authorities, there were no reports of AI in more than 300 poultry farms in the Mainland.

17. PS(HWF) responded that one of the precautionary measures recommended by OIE was that importation of live chickens from places affected by AI should be considered at least 21 days after the last outbreak.

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18. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked whether the 21-day period applied to the last AI outbreak in Guangdong only, or also other places in the Mainland as well. He said that he understood that the last outbreak was in Doumen, Zhuhai City. The Chairman pointed out that an AI outbreak in Yang Jiang, Guangdong Province was reported on 11 February 2004.

19. PS(HWF) explained that as there were no internal quarantine systems to monitor the movement of live poultry between places in the Mainland, there were difficulties in ensuring that the live chickens in one place would not be mixed with those from other places. Hence, in deciding the opportune time for Hong Kong to lift the import ban on live chickens from the Mainland, the outbreak situation in the whole of the Mainland would have to be considered in order to minimize health risks. Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) supplemented that in considering the imposition of an import ban, Hong Kong applied the same standards to the Mainland and other overseas countries. Also, the relevant authorities in the jurisdictions concerned would be requested to supply sufficient information on their preventive measures against the spread of AI.

20. The Chairman and Mrs Selina CHOW asked whether the Administration had started making preparations for resuming the importation of live chickens from the Mainland. The Chairman added that the Administration should send officials to the Mainland to inspect the poultry farms there before finalizing the arrangements.

21. PS(HWF) said that the Administration acknowledged the concern of the trade. However, for safety sake, it would be prudent not to resume importation of live chickens until the situation of AI outbreaks in the Mainland and other places had eased off. She added that there was still supply of live chickens in the local market but the current sale volume was low. The resumption of live chickens imported from the Mainland might increase the risk of infection of the chickens which had stocked up in the market. DFEH informed members that staff of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department visited the market retail outlets every morning and took record of the number of the chickens available for sale. At present, around 20 000 to 30 000 chickens were sold every day, while 100 000 were sold each day before the threat of AI outbreak.

22. DFEH added that veterinary surgeons had made visits to poultry farms in Guangdong. However, due to biosecurity and other practical restrictions, a veterinary surgeon could only visit one poultry farm a day. To visit a couple of hundreds of poultry farms in the Mainland would entail tremendous manpower resources. He further advised that there was only a limited number of veterinary surgeons in Hong Kong, and many were engaged in the treatment of small animals, like cats and dogs. The Department had a total of six veterinary surgeons. To monitor the health condition of live poultry in the Mainland, much had to depend on the expertise available in the Mainland.

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23. Mr Tommy CHEUNG enquired about the possibility of Hong Kong sending persons to the Mainland farms to check if there were any unusual chicken deaths and perform blood and faeces tests for the chickens. PS(HWF) responded that AI virus could spread very fast should there be an outbreak. Therefore, the suggestion of resuming importation of live chickens might not be desirable for safety reasons.

24. Mrs Selina CHOW said that the Administration should carefully assess the financial hardship faced by local live poultry traders. Mr Tommy CHEUNG agreed with Mrs CHOW. He said that there had been previous reports in the media that an outbreak of AI in Hong Kong might lead to loss of hundreds of thousands of human lives. This had deterred people from consuming live poultry and had dealt a serious blow to the poultry trade, and also the catering, restaurant and tourist business. He further pointed out that many live poultry farms in the Mainland were run by investors from Hong Kong. The import ban had caused great financial loss to those small investors. Mr CHEUNG opined that while safeguard of public health was of utmost importance, the Administration should also explain to the public the actual situation and restore public confidence in consuming poultry. He shared the concern expressed by members of the trade that import of live chickens from the Mainland should be resumed as soon as possible. In his view, the existing surveillance and control measures were effective to ensure that imported chickens would be safe for consumption. He also considered that when the import ban was removed, local wholesalers and retailers should be able to make adjustments themselves as to the amount of live chickens to be imported to avoid over-stocking.

25. Mr WONG Yung-kan agreed that the Administration should review the situation and the possibility of lifting the ban on importation of live chicken from the Mainland as soon as practicable.

26. Mr Tommy CHEUNG suggested that the Administration should arrange a meeting for members of the trade to explain their problems and present their views on measures to deal with the present situation. Mr Andrew CHENG supported Mr CHEUNG's suggestion. He also informed members that the Democratic Party considered that stringent safety standards should be adopted to avoid occurrence of AI in Hong Kong, and the Government should provide financial relief to those whose livelihood had been affected by the import ban.

Relief measures and financial assistance

27. The Chairman, Mrs Selina CHOW and Mr WONG Yung-kan asked whether the Administration had formulated any relief measures to assist those facing hardship resulting from the import ban. Referring to the situation in Thailand, Mrs Selina CHOW pointed out that the Thai Government had taken swift action in providing assistance and relief payment to the poultry traders shortly after the outbreak in last December. She opined that the Administration should act without delay.

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28. PS(HWF) responded that with the outbreaks in Hong Kong in 1997, 2001 and 2002, AI had become endemic. The Administration would require more time to consider and assess the financial implications of any compensation which would be made to the affected parties, taking into account the need for prudent use of public money. She said that discussion within the Administration was taking place. The Administration would consult widely with all parties, and seek the support of the Legislative Council on any recommended measures in due course.

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29. Mrs Selina CHOW urged that the Administration should get a thorough understanding of the problems faced by the trade and accord priority to addressing them.

Other issues raised

30. Mr WONG Yung-kan queried whether it was appropriate for some government officials to have made the statement that an outbreak of AI might kill large number of people in Hong Kong. Dr LO Wing-lok said that he found the messages delivered by the Administration confusing.

31. PS(HWF) responded that the AI virus could mutate and the Administration had a responsibility to alert the public to the worst case scenario, having regard to the outbreak situation in the neighbouring countries and the latest information and advice provided by WHO. The public would then be in a position to make their own judgments.

32. Mr Michael MAK said that he was disappointed that the Administration had not mapped out any clear preventive strategies despite that there had been three previous outbreaks of AI in Hong Kong. Mr Michael MAK and Mrs Selina CHOW enquired what measures would be taken by the Administration to restore confidence of the public in consumption of live chickens.

33. PS(HWF) and DAFC said that local poultry farm operators had been urged to adopt stringent surveillance and control measures to prevent AI from occurring in Hong Kong, and they had been very co-operative in this regard. The Administration had also advised the public through various publicity channels that thoroughly cooked chickens would be safe for eating. Moreover, upon resumption of importation of live chickens, the inspection and quarantine measures would be strengthened to ensure that strict hygiene standards would be complied with. It was anticipated that public confidence in consuming chickens would be restored gradually.

34. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked whether the Administration would appoint some veterinary surgeons/specialists to the Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene. PS(HWF) responded that the Administration would consider the proposal.

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35. Dr LO Wing-lok asked whether there were new regulatory measures on imported cooked chickens. He added that he supported that poultry's viscera should not be imported. The Chairman asked whether the ban on viscera would include that of chilled and frozen chickens.

36. DFEH advised that the viscera would be removed before the chilled and frozen chickens were imported into Hong Kong. As cooked meat would not carry the AI virus, importation of cooked chickens was not affected.

37. Referring to paragraph 6 in the Administration paper on contingency measures implemented in response to recent AI outbreaks, the Chairman asked whether a formal mechanism had been established with the Mainland for exchange of information on suspected AI cases.

38. Deputy Secretary (Health, Welfare and Food) replied that a formal liaison mechanism had been established with the Ministry of Agriculture and the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine. The Mainland authorities would notify Hong Kong as soon as possible on any reported AI cases. The reporting could be made within a short time.

39. Mr Michael MAK, who was Chairman of the Panel on Health Services (HS Panel), expressed regret that the Administration had not prepared any information paper on AI for the consideration of the Panel at its previous meeting on 9 February 2004. In response to Mr MAK, PS(HWF) undertook to provide the Administration's paper to the HS Panel for the consideration by its members.

III. Any other business

Special meeting on 16 February 2004

40. Members agreed that a special meeting would be held on 16 February 2004 at 8:30 am at the Chamber to receive views from deputations on measures against outbreak of AI in Hong Kong.

41. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 10:40 am.