

**For discussion  
on 25 February 2004**

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Proposed interim measures and longer-term issues  
to address the avian influenza problem**

**Purpose**

This paper seeks Members' views on the proposed interim measures to be taken during the period in which there is no supply of imported poultry from the Mainland and to suggest issues on how to further prevent avian influenza for further public consultation.

**Background**

2. The recent epidemics of avian influenza in poultry in Asia is unprecedented and a cause for alarm. Since mid-December 2003, a total of ten countries and places in the Region have been affected. These include South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan, Mainland, Taiwan, Indonesia and Laos. According to the latest situation report produced by the World Health Organization (WHO), full control has yet to be achieved in any of these places. In Japan, the authorities have confirmed that the country's second outbreak of avian influenza, detected in the Oita Prefecture, is caused by the H5N1 strain. In the Mainland, the authorities have reported 53 outbreaks in poultry in 16 provinces. In Thailand and Vietnam, the authorities have reported 31 laboratory-confirmed cases of human infection with H5N1 avian influenza. Of these, 22 have died. H5N1 showed itself to be a highly fatal disease with mortality as high as 70-80%. Unfortunately, many who died were young children. For all these reasons, the WHO cautioned that there is a need to maintain a high level of vigilance to ensure that there is no relaxation in our surveillance and detection efforts.

### **Potential threat of avian influenza**

3. Not every strain of avian influenza viruses will infect humans, but there is a risk that the viruses may pose serious threat to public health. H5N1 virus is of particular concern to us as it is shown to be able to jump across species to infect humans. Previous H5N1 human infection cases show that the disease can be highly fatal.

4. Avian influenza viruses have the propensity to reassort into a new strain of virus that may pose serious threat to public health. There is concern from international health authorities, including the WHO, that if the H5N1 virus acquired genes from human influenza viruses, it might become readily transmissible from person to person and give rise to an influenza pandemic.

5. According to the WHO, the risk of having H5N1 virus to become endemic amongst poultry in the region is very high and that it would take sometime before the recent outbreak situation begins to stabilize. The epidemics in poultry and possible widespread presence of the virus in the environment increase opportunities for human exposure and infection. There is a risk that the incident may lead to the emergence of a new influenza virus strain, resulting in an influenza pandemic.

### **Measures that have been taken**

6. Since 1998, we have put in place a very comprehensive preventive and surveillance programme to reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong. Our current preventive measures are three-pronged: vaccination of all land-based poultry against H5 avian influenza infection, strengthened biosecurity standard at local farms to prevent the introduction of viruses to farms, and implementation of two market rest days to reduce the viral load, if any, in retail outlets. In the light of the recent avian influenza epidemics in the region, we have also implemented a series of precautionary measures to strengthen our line of defence which, amongst other things, include a temporary import

suspension of all live birds (including live poultry) and poultry meat from the affected places.

7. So far, our preventive measures are found to be effective in achieving zero H5N1 infection in Hong Kong. However, the outbreak situation in the region strongly suggests that the problem will be recurrent for the next few years. Vaccination is not the panacea of the avian influenza problem, as it cannot eradicate the risk that any H5N1 avian influenza virus may reassort or mutate to the extent that it may pose a threat to public health. Moreover, the vaccine that we are using would have no effects on other types of avian influenza viruses (such as H7-type which may be highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses). The virus has been found to jump across species to affect humans. There remains a risk that the virus may reassort with other human influenza virus to produce a lethal human pandemic strain.

8. We cannot ignore the potential public health hazard that could be caused by avian influenza viruses. In Hong Kong, besides members of the trade who are in frequent contact with live poultry, consumers can also come into close contact with live poultry easily because it is sold in the retail outlets. The crowded living environment in Hong Kong further amplifies the risk.

9. Past experience has shown that the principal mode of transmission of the virus from poultry to human is through contact with live poultry or their faeces. Hence, the most effective way to minimize the health risk posed by avian influenza is to reduce as much as possible the contact between the public and live poultry. The community needs to consider if live poultry should continue to be sold in retail outlets.

10. In the meantime, however, there is a need to develop interim measures to address a number of immediate issues concerning the supply of poultry which is expected to be exhausted in about two to three months' time. In this connection, the Administration had recently sought the views of academics and experts on the broad principles with regard to the risk management of avian influenza and these included, among others, the resumption of chilled and frozen poultry meat from

approved Mainland farms and the importation of fertilized eggs and development of local hatcheries to tie over the period in which there is no importation of day-old chickens.

### **Proposed Interim Measures**

#### **(a) *Import of live, chilled and frozen poultry***

11. In the light of the spread and severity of the avian influenza outbreaks in the region, we do not envisage that the importation of live poultry including day-old chickens from the infected places could resume in the near future. Since chilled and frozen poultry impose relatively lesser risk to human health, priority consideration will be given to resumption of, in the first place, import of chilled and frozen poultry, as the outbreak situation in the Region starts to ease off.

12. Ensuring public health and maintaining the safety level of food consumed by the public is the first priority of the Government. In considering whether we can lift the restriction on the importation of chilled and frozen poultry from the affected places, we will assess the risks against the two objectives and draw reference from the recommendations from the WHO and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has started devising the criteria and procedures for lifting the restriction.

#### **(b) *Development of local hatching operation***

13. As the import of day-old chickens will not be resumed in the near future, local chicken farmers will not be able to replenish their stock after they have sold all their existing stock. According to our estimation, the existing live chicken stock, which is about 2.5 million, would only be able to satisfy an average daily demand of about 30,000 chickens for a maximum period of about three months. We intend to encourage local farmers to produce day-old chickens locally by importing fertile eggs for hatching for local farms.

14. At present, there is no licensing control over hatching operations in Hong Kong. Veterinary advice indicates that the importation of fertile eggs represents a lower risk of introducing avian influenza when compared with the importation of day-old chickens. Nonetheless, to assure that avian influenza viruses will not be introduced into Hong Kong by fertile eggs, we will put in place a system to control and monitor local hatching operations. Eggs will be required to be sanitized in the place of origin before entering Hong Kong. Sanitation of eggs must comply with the requirements set up by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD).

15. AFCD will only allow licensed chicken farms to source day-old chickens from “approved” hatcheries. “Approved” hatcheries will cover the incubators which will be located in licensed poultry farms and subject to the new conditions to be imposed by AFCD under the livestock keeping licences. “Approved” hatcheries will also include any hatching operation conducted outside licensed poultry farms and is recognized by AFCD after a vetting process. By using the existing agricultural credit facilities, AFCD will provide some sort of financial aid to those farmers who intend to invest in and develop their hatching operation. The hatching operation may involve specialized skill and we need to address the issue of availability of suitable labour, particularly in the initial stage of the development to facilitate technology transfer. Over the next few weeks, AFCD will actively discuss with the poultry farmers and with other Government departments on the feasibility of establishing local hatcheries.

(c) ***Review of the existing regulatory framework for local poultry farming***

16. Having considered the possibility that H5N1 virus has become endemic in poultry in the region, we consider it necessary to introduce additional measures on our local production. We will conduct a review of the regulatory framework for the licensing of local poultry farms with a view to ensuring the highest standards of farm biosecurity possible to prevent the incursion of the virus into our farms. These may include the requirements to exercise “all-in-all-out” on a chicken shed basis, the

provision of fully enclosed chicken sheds with 24-hour temperature, humidity and ventilation control and orientation of sheds to minimize aerosol spread. We fully acknowledge that the revamped farm regulatory framework may require additional investment but this will be necessary for the protection of public health and we will consult the trade in due course.

### **Relief Measures and Financial Assistance**

17. The Administration is fully aware that there may be a need to provide a package of relief measures and financial assistance such as low interest loans to the poultry farmers, wholesalers, retailers and transporters in order to help them to tide over a difficult period. We are now developing various options and will consult the Panel in due course.

### **The Next Step**

18. For the next step, we intend to report back to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene at its next meeting in March on the criteria and circumstances under which the importation of chilled and frozen poultry meat from the Mainland and from other infected countries may resume. We will also report back to the Panel on the detailed proposals for establishing hatcheries in Hong Kong after consultation with the trade. Later, we will also consult the public on the policy objective of separating humans and live poultry and this may include central or regional slaughtering as a means to achieve the policy objective.

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