

Press Release

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OIE guidelines heeded in resuming import of live poultry

Hong Kong will make reference to proposed guidelines by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) which call for a three-month period before resuming import of live poultry from an infected zone after slaughter of the last avian influenza case, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, Dr Yeoh Eng-kiong, told the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene of the Legislative Council today (March 19).

Dr Yeoh reiterated that public health and the health of the people of Hong Kong was the prime consideration in deciding when to resume the importation of live poultry.

According to OIE's latest proposed guidelines, new concepts relating to farm management are being considered by the international community such as zonal definition vis-a-vis countrywide definition.

In addition, consideration could be given to, for example, place focus on no poultry or pig farm within a zone of three-kilometre radius of the farm exporting chickens, acceptable and auditable biosecurity arrangements in place, vaccination programme on farm, testing for presence of virus in every batch of chickens consigned and stringent control on trucks and cages used for export of poultry.

"Discussions and site visits to the Mainland will be held. If we are satisfied that the farm has implemented suitable arrangements, then we can consider early resumption of importation of live poultry from individual farms," Dr Yeoh said.

The last farm outbreak in Guangdong Province took place on February 12. It would be by far the safest to resume the importation of live poultry from the Mainland on May 12, he said.

Dr Yeoh stressed that to reduce the risk of avian influenza, conditions in retail markets had to be improved and the number of live poultry in the markets reduced. There would be short, interim and longer term measures to improve market conditions by reducing the density of live poultry and minimise as far as possible the contact between the public and live poultry.

Short-term measures included the installation of plastic sheets at poultry stalls to separate chickens from humans and a proposal to increase the number of market rest days.

In the interim, the Government had to reduce the number and the density of market stalls while at the same time encourage operators to opt for larger stalls in markets through buying back licences for retail.

Longer-term action would include options to separate humans from live poultry, including central or regional slaughtering. The Government would consult the public on these options in about two

weeks' time.

"We are also looking into the feasibility of separating the wholesale markets for local and Mainland chickens," he added.

The Government fully understood the financial difficulties faced by traders and would apply for \$42 million from the Finance Committee to provide an one-off ex-gratia allowance to wholesalers, retailers and transporters to help them tide over this difficult period. These proposals had been formulated following discussions with the live poultry trade.

The proposed ex-gratia payments were modelled on the package for the poultry trade during the avian influenza outbreak in 2001.

In the main, a wholesale poultry stall under the management of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) would be granted an one-off ex-gratia payment of \$40,000.

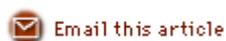
For a poultry stall at the wet markets under the management of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and a fresh provision shop selling live poultry at the wet markets under the management of the Housing Authority or Housing Society, the ex-gratia payment would be \$30,000.

For a fresh provision shop selling live poultry in private premises, the payout would be \$60,000. Meanwhile, the payment for a lorry regularly transporting live poultry in AFCD's poultry wholesale market would be \$24,000.

Ends/Friday, March 19, 2004

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Live bird imports resume from avian influenza free countries

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) today (March 19) resumed processing applications for importation of live birds from countries or places unaffected by avian influenza.

An AFCD spokesman said there was still a temporary suspension on imports from countries or places which had reported highly pathogenic avian influenza.

"Under the existing import protocol, all live birds to be imported into Hong Kong are required to be tested free of H5 avian influenza in their country or place of origin before importation and to be accompanied by health certificates issued by the competent veterinary authority in their country or place of origin," the spokesman said.

"This procedure is in line with international practice," the spokesman said.

As a precautionary measure during the early resumption period, the AFCD might impose extra requirements on selective commercial consignments apart from existing import requirements. These additional measures include sampling and screen testing on arrival before release of the consignments.

The spokesman said the easing of restrictions was a result of careful evaluation and assessment of the avian influenza situation in the region especially on the situation involving wild birds and pet birds.

"For countries or places which have reported avian influenza, we will review the suspension of import of live birds from these areas in accordance with the international guidelines," the spokesman added.

A list of countries or places on which the temporary suspension of import of live birds is imposed is uploaded on to AFCD's website (http://www.afcd.gov.hk/quarantine/animals_e.htm).

Hong Kong imported a total of 190,572 live pet birds in 2003. The major sources of these imports were the Mainland, Indonesia, South Africa, Mozambique and Singapore.

Ends/Friday, March 19, 2004

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