

**For information
on 11 January 2005**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Prevention of Avian Influenza: Consultation on Long Term Direction to
Minimise the Risk of Human Infection**

Introduction

This paper presents the results of the public consultation exercise on the long-term direction to minimize the risk of human infection of avian influenza and the way forward.

Background

2. The Administration presented a consultation paper entitled: “Prevention of Avian Influenza: Consultation on Long Term Direction to Minimise the Risk of Human Infection” to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene at its meeting held on 2 April 2004. The paper set out the Administration’s analysis of the avian influenza situation and its long-term vision to further protect public health from avian influenza. It also sought to solicit public views on the long-term direction to minimize the risk of human infection of avian influenza, in particular to seek views on the “cold chain approach”¹ (also known as Central Slaughtering) and “freshly slaughtered chicken approach”² (also known as Regional Slaughtering). The public consultation was conducted from 2 April to 2 July 2004 during which about 80,000 and 90,000 copies of the consultation document and pamphlet were distributed respectively. A relevant Announcement of Public Interests was broadcasted over 760 and 690 times on television and radio respectively.

¹ Under the “cold chain approach/Central Slaughtering”, all live poultry will be slaughtered and undergo chilling process in a slaughtering house. Retail outlets would only be allowed to sell chilled poultry.

² Under the “freshly slaughtering chicken approach/Regional Slaughtering”, all live poultry will be slaughtered and dressed at regional slaughtering hubs. Consumers would have a choice of purchasing either chilled chickens or freshly slaughtered chickens. Consumers can purchase freshly slaughtered chickens from the retail outlets located at the slaughtering hubs or have them delivered to their homes/restaurants by vehicles with refrigeration facilities. Freshly slaughtered chickens cannot stay wholesome for a long period of time and must be sold on the day of slaughter. They are required to be kept in chillers while being displayed for sale at the slaughtering hubs.

Briefing sessions were also held for the traders and trade associations, professional bodies, academia, District Councilors and Legislators, etc.

3. At the end of the consultation period, we have received over 10,000 submissions. A breakdown of the submissions is at Annex A. They can be broadly categorized into the following -

(a) Individual Submissions

4. The individual submissions (2,522 in total) were received by mails, faxes, emails or completed questionnaires (attached to the consultation pamphlet issued by the Administration) dropping in collection boxes. They were mostly sent from individual members of the public, of which over 2,000 submissions (or over 80%) supported Central or Regional Slaughtering. Amongst the two options, Central Slaughtering received more support (1,334 submissions or 53%) than Regional Slaughtering (709 submissions or 28%). The most popular reasons for choosing Central Slaughtering are “public health should take precedence” and “it could segregate humans from live poultry more effectively” while the major reason for supporting Regional Slaughtering is to retain the existing eating culture.

5. The medical professional bodies and academic institutes/individual academics, accounting for 47 submissions, are the second largest group of supporters for the two strategic approaches. The majority of these submissions agreed with the Government’s analysis of the potential threat of avian influenza to humans and supported the Government’s proposed approaches to achieve the policy of segregating humans from live poultry. Among this group of supporters, 35 submissions or about 74%, chose Central Slaughtering. On the contrary, we have received three submissions from veterinary professional bodies raising objection to Central and Regional Slaughtering, although one of them supplemented that it would not object to Regional Slaughtering under certain conditions.

6. Lastly, there was also a noticeable number (479 submissions or 19%) of the direct submissions opted for maintaining the status quo (235 submissions or 9%), objected to either one or both approaches (128 submissions or 5%), or considered the interim measures alone as sufficient (49 submissions or 2%), etc. Again, most of these submissions were originated

from individual members of the public, followed by those from the live poultry trade.

(b) Standardized Forms/Questionnaires Submitted by Political Parties, Trade and Related Bodies

7. This category of submissions, (6,994 in total) included standardized forms/questionnaires prepared by the trade and by political parties, completed questionnaires of the Administration's consultation pamphlet submitted in bulk, etc. All of them did not support both approaches. Among them, over 2,800 submissions or 40% preferred the status quo or object to either one or both approaches. However, about over 4,000 submission or 58% of them supported the implementation or expedition of the medium term measures outlined in the consultation paper to segregate customers from live poultry as far as possible. In addition, the majority of them (over 6,100 submissions or 87%) also requested the Government to formulate policies for the development of the local agriculture industry and improve the viability of wet markets.

(c) Signatures

8. A number of Legislative Councilors and District Councilors collected 1,081 signatures on standardized letters. The main demand was to relax the restriction on the importation of live chickens so as to reduce price. With a view to prevent human infection of avian influenza and at the same time allow the public to continue to buy live chickens, the letter set out three key comments, namely -

- (i) supported the Government's policy to segregate humans from live poultry for protecting public health;
- (ii) objected to the implementation of central slaughtering now to reserve the citizen's choice of buying live chickens; and
- (iii) urged the Government to increase the daily quantity of live chickens imported from the Mainland to 60,000 to suppress the retail price of live chickens.

Views of District Councils

9. Apart from collecting submissions, the Administration also took the initiative to brief all the District Councils (DCs) on the gist of the consultation paper. The views of the DCs on the two proposed approaches were mixed. While some had a clearer inclination towards either one or both approaches, the others supported the status quo/with interim measures, or held mixed views. In summary, the major reasons for supporting the proposed approaches are -

- (a) public health should be the government's primary consideration;
- (b) there is an urgency to act now instead of risking any chance of loss of human lives and any adverse effects on Hong Kong's economy; and
- (c) local eating habit would change over time.

On the other hand, the major reasons against the approaches are –

- (a) negative impact on the relevant trade;
- (b) current measures proved to be effective in recent outbreaks;
- (c) affect the public in terms of eating habit and inconvenience;
- (d) too expensive to implement; and
- (e) insufficient information in terms of operational details for assessing the options.

Opinion Surveys

10. In addition to the above, the Administration has also commissioned three opinion surveys to monitor public views on avian influenza and the Government's policy to prevent human infection of avian influenza. They were done in late March, mid May and late August of 2004, in which 1,211, 1,204 and 1,213 persons aged 18 or above were interviewed by phone respectively. The summary of the results (Annex B) revealed that -

- (i) the public has been consistent in some fundamental issues, such as having high regards to the importance of safeguarding public health and support to the policy of separating humans and live poultry;
- (ii) slightly more people (grew from 42% in the first survey to 48% in the third survey) become less worried about the spread of avian influenza among humans after virus re-assortment;
- (iii) considerably less people (from 72% in the first survey to 57% in the third survey) think that the Government has sufficient measures for preventing Hong Kong people from being infected by avian influenza; and
- (iv) considerably more people (from 62% in the first survey to 74% in the third survey) support the policy objective of separating humans from live poultry.

Factors of Consideration

11. The Government has the responsibility to safeguard public health by minimizing the risk of infectious disease outbreaks. It remains our policy to separate humans from live poultry to prevent human infection of avian influenza. In the public consultation, there were a number of key factors of consideration suggested by different sectors of the community, such as the health of Hong Kong people, the economic impact of the outbreak, the livelihood of the live poultry traders, the reputation of Hong Kong as the “Gourmet Paradise” and the traditional eating culture.

12. The consultation results show that there were clear demands for striking a balance amongst the above factors so that on the one hand Hong Kong was less vulnerable to the outbreak of avian influenza, and on the other hand the livelihood of the trade, the eating culture of Hong Kong people and our status as the “Gourmet Paradise” could be preserved. Apart from these factors, in practical terms, it is also necessary to assess the commercial and operational feasibility of the different approaches.

Way Forward

13. Although Hong Kong has not been affected by the regional outbreak of avian influenza occurred so far, the risk of an outbreak in Hong Kong is still and will always be there, and we must not be complacent as our existing biosecurity measures alone would not be able to render sufficient protection as they are unable to separate humans and live poultry at the retail ends. Against this background, the Administration will take into account the varied views received during this consultation exercise and make a policy decision on the matter in the near future.

14. In the meantime, the Administration will explore the feasibility of providing a small to medium sized slaughterhouse in Hong Kong on a pilot basis. As a first step, we will try to identify suitable locations in Hong Kong and assess their feasibility for converting into small to medium sized slaughterhouses. With the preliminary study results, we will further consider the details of implementation in consultation with all stakeholders.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
January 2005

**Breakdown of Submissions Received for
“Prevention of Avian Influenza: Consultation on Long Term Direction
to Minimise the Risk of Human Infection”**

1. Number of Submission Received by Major Categories

Individual Submissions	Standardized Forms/Questionnaires Submitted by Political Parties, Trade and Related Bodies	Signatures	TOTAL
2,522	6,994	1,081	10,597

2. Background of the Senders of the Submissions Sent Directly to the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Background of Senders	Number of Submissions Received
Individual Members of the Public	2,343
Of which: with personal particulars	(1,181)
anonymous	(1,162)
Live poultry trade	78
Medical and veterinary professional bodies and individual professionals in the sectors	37
Academic institutes and individual academics	14
Catering sector	12
Individual District Councilors and Area Committee Members	8
Chilled/frozen poultry and meat trade	5
Political parties	4
Government’s advisory bodies	3
Individual LegCo Member	1
Others	17
TOTAL	2,522

Summary of the Results of Opinion Polls on Prevention of Avian Influenza

- (Question of 3rd round only) Did you notice the recent avian influenza outbreaks in Vietnam and Malaysia?

	Percentage
No	26.5
Yes	72.7
Don't know/No comment	0.9
Total	100.0

Note: There are 1 213 respondents in this round of opinion poll while the previous rounds averaged about 1 200 respondents.

- Are you worry that avian influenza virus may mutate and lead to human-to-human transmission?

	Percentage		
	1 st Round 30/3 – 1/4	2 nd Round 14–16/5	3 rd Round 30/8–2/9
Not worried	41.5	43.1	48.2
Worried	54.8	52.4	47.7
Don't know/No comment	3.6	4.5	4.1
Refuse to Answer the Question	0.1	--	--
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

- Do you think the current measures adopted by the Government are sufficient to prevent Hong Kong people from contracting avian influenza?

	Percentage		
	1 st Round	2 nd Round	3 rd Round
Insufficient	14.2	21.3	22.5
Sufficient	71.8	65.2	57.0
Don't know/No comment	13.4	13.3	20.4
Refuse to Answer	0.5	0.1	0.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

- For the Government to implement policies to prevent Hong Kong people from contracting avian influenza, do you consider the following factors important or not?

	Rounds	Percentage							Total
		Very unimportant	Unimportant	Not particularly important	Important	Very important	Don't know/No comment	Refuse to answer	
Health of Hong Kong people	1 st	0.4	1.0	4.0	34.8	58.2	1.4	0.3	100.0
	2 nd	0.5	1.2	3.9	38.1	54.8	1.4	0.1	100.0
	3 rd	0.2	0.7	4.1	41.8	51.8	1.3	0.1	100.0
Impact of an avian influenza outbreak on Hong Kong's economy	1 st	0.3	3.4	7.6	41.3	44.3	2.7	0.3	100.0
	2 nd	0.4	2.4	6.0	46.7	41.2	3.2	0.1	100.0
	3 rd	0.1	3.1	7.2	52.9	33.1	3.5	0.1	100.0
Livelihood of people engaged in live poultry trade	1 st	1.1	10.4	19.4	50.8	10.8	7.3	0.3	100.0
	2 nd	0.7	7.5	21.2	48.9	13.3	8.0	0.3	100.0
	3 rd	0.8	8.3	12.5	57.9	11.9	8.6	0.1	100.0
Reputation of Hong Kong as "Gourmet Paradise"	1 st	1.3	16.1	24.5	44.8	8.7	4.3	0.3	100.0
	2 nd	1.0	14.5	20.5	48.4	10.0	5.3	0.3	100.0
	3 rd	0.7	12.9	15.8	54.2	10.9	5.3	0.1	100.0
Culinary tradition of Hong Kong people	1 st	0.9	19.3	28.5	40.8	5.1	5.2	0.3	100.0
	2 nd	1.6	17.5	26.5	42.8	5.9	5.4	0.3	100.0
	3 rd	1.3	19.0	20.1	47.3	6.6	5.6	0.1	100.0

- (Question of 3rd round only) For the Government to implement policies to prevent Hong Kong people from contracting avian influenza, which of the following factors is the most important?

	Percentage
Health of Hong Kong people	79.7
Impact on Hong Kong's economy	9.6
Livelihood of those engaged in live poultry trade	2.2
Reputation as "Gourmet Paradise"	1.1
Culinary tradition of Hong Kong people	1.8
Don't know/No comment	5.5
Refuse to answer	0.2
Total	100.0

- Do you support the policy direction of “separating humans from live poultry”?

	Percentage		
	1 st Round	2 nd Round	3 rd Round
Against	21.6	11.6	10.7
Support	61.6	73.3	74.1
Don't know/No comment	16.2	14.8	14.6
Refuse to answer	0.5	0.2	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

- (For those against the policy direction of “separating humans from live poultry”) Why do you oppose the policy direction of “separating humans from live poultry”?

	Percentage			
	With number of respondents who oppose the policy direction of “separating humans from live poultry” as the base		With total number of respondents as the base	
	2 nd Round	3 rd Round	2 nd Round	3 rd Round
The policy of “separating humans from live poultry” is unnecessary	3.5	23.0	0.4	2.5
Makes it inconvenient to buy chickens	17.4	20.0	2.0	2.1
Wish to maintain the status quo	4.9	18.3	0.6	2.0
Cannot pick and choose chickens	18.6	7.4	2.2	0.8
Affect the livelihood of those engaged in live poultry trade	22.9	7.3	2.7	0.8
The policy is too draconian	22.7	6.3	2.6	0.7
Low infectivity of avian influenza	4.6	--	0.5	--
Others	1.5	7.9	0.2	0.8
Don't know/No comment	3.8	7.6	0.4	0.8
Refuse to answer	--	2.4	--	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	11.6	10.7

- (Question of 2nd and 3rd rounds only. For those who support the policy direction of separating humans from live poultry) Would you prefer to ban all live chickens from market and retail outlets or to re-configure the markets and retail outlets to ensure that the public would not come into direct contact with live chickens?

	Percentage			
	With number of respondents who support the policy direction of “separating humans and live poultry” as the base		With total number of respondents as the base	
	2 nd round	3 rd round	2 nd round	3 rd round
No live chicken for sale at markets and retail outlets	19.7	16.0	14.5	11.9
Re-configure the markets and retail outlets to ensure that the public would not come into direct contact with live chickens	71.2	73.6	52.2	54.6
Proper attention to hygiene would suffice	0.7	--	0.5	--
Wish to maintain the status quo	0.3	3.8	0.2	2.8
Other alternatives	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.4
Don't know/ No comment	7.6	6.0	5.6	4.5
Refuse to answer	0.2	--	0.2	--
Total	100.0	100.0	73.3	74.1

- (Question of 2nd and 3rd rounds only) If there is no live chicken for sale at markets and retail outlets, would you opt for central slaughtering that offer chilled chickens at general markets and retail outlets or for regional slaughtering hubs that offer freshly slaughtered chickens at their adjoining outlets?

	Percentage	
	2 nd round	3 rd round
Implement central slaughtering option that offers chilled chickens for sale at general markets and retail outlets	28.8	29.8
Implement regional slaughtering hubs option that offers freshly slaughtered chickens at their adjoining retail outlets	54.7	51.1
Wish to maintain the status quo	0.8	3.4
Neither is acceptable	0.4	1.6
Both are acceptable	0.6	8.3
Re-configure all markets so that freshly slaughtered chickens may be offered for sale	0.2	0.6
Other alternatives	0.4	0.1
Don't know/ No comment	13.9	5.0
Refuse to answer	0.3	0.1
Total	100.0	100.0

- In case there is no chicken for sale in markets, would your eating habits be affected seriously or slightly?

	Percentage		
	1 st round	2 nd round	3 rd round
Very slightly	17.6	29.1	31.2
Slightly	33.4	28.5	35.8
Moderately	24.8	26.0	16.4
Serious	14.4	10.5	10.4
Very serious	8.6	4.0	5.0
Don't know/No comment	1.1	1.8	1.2
Refuse to answer	0.1	--	0.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

- END -