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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Minutes of Special Meeting
held on Monday, 31 October 2005 at 8:30 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building

- Members present** : Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP (Chairman)
Hon WONG Yung-kan, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Bernard CHAN, JP
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP
Hon Vincent FANG Kang, JP
Dr Hon Joseph LEE Kok-long
Dr Hon KWOK Ka-ki
- Members attending** : Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP
Hon WONG Kwok-hing, MH
- Member absent** : Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
- Public Officers Attending** : Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary (Food and Environmental Hygiene)
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
- Mr Wallace LAU
Principal Assistant Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene) 1
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Ms Rhonda LO
Assistant Director (Operations)³
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Mr LAU Sin-pang
Deputy Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

Dr Thomas SIT Hon-chung
Assistant Director (Inspection and Quarantine)
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

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

Staff in Attendance : Miss Betty MA
Senior Council Secretary (2)¹

Ms Anna CHEUNG
Legislative Assistant (2)⁵

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I Comprehensive plan to deal with the global problem of avian influenza
[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)199/05-06(01), CB(2)1042/04-05(01) and
CB(2)1860/04-05(05)]

The Chairman said that in view of the recent spread of avian influenza in the world, the special meeting was convened to discuss the latest development of avian influenza outbreaks and preventive measures taken by the Administration against avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong.

2. Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Food and Environmental Hygiene) (DS(FEH)) highlighted the salient points in the Administration's paper which gave an account of the preventive and surveillance measures taken to prevent avian influenza outbreaks since 1998. DS(FEH) further said that the Administration had stepped up biosecurity requirements for live poultry farms and security measures for pet birds, and also strengthened surveillance measures for wild birds.

3. Deputy Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DD/AFCD) added that following the recent avian influenza outbreaks outside Hong Kong, AFCD staff

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had immediately advised poultry farmers and traders to step up biosecurity measures in farms and wholesale markets, including installation or repair of bird-nets to avoid contact of poultry with wild/migratory birds. Farmers, poultry wholesalers, retailers and transporters were also advised to take preventive measures including maintaining good personal hygiene and taking vaccination. DD/AFCD said that the traders had been positive in their response.

4. On the security measures for pet birds, DD/AFCD pointed out that AFCD had stepped up inspections of pet shops to ensure compliance with the licensing conditions, and to detect whether there were clinical symptoms of infection in such pets. DD/AFCD said that pet birds imported into Hong Kong must comply with the inspection and quarantine requirements under which the birds must be examined and certified free of infectious diseases before shipment. Birds imported from countries adjacent to infected places were subject to “hold and test” at AFCD facilities, and would not be released until negative result was confirmed.

5. DD/AFCD further said that preventive measures against avian influenza outbreaks included surveillance of wild birds and testing samples of their droppings. He advised that since 2005, about 7 000 bird dropping samples had been tested, and all of them were tested negative for H5 avian influenza. DD/AFCD said that upon discovery of dead birds, AFCD staff would immediately follow up and conduct tests to ascertain whether the deaths were caused by avian influenza.

Notification of avian influenza cases occurred in the Mainland

6. The Chairman said that in view of the importance of the issue under discussion, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) should have attended the meeting to brief members on the latest developments. The Chairman asked whether the Administration had been notified by the Mainland authorities of the recent avian influenza outbreak and suspected cases of human infection of avian influenza in Hunan.

7. DS(FEH) responded that the Administration had received notification from the Ministry of Agriculture immediately after the discovery of avian influenza outbreak in Hunan. He pointed out that since the last avian influenza outbreak in Hunan in July 2004, the Administration had suspended the importation of poultry and poultry meat from Hunan. There was no need for the Administration to take further actions against the avian influenza outbreak in Hunan at the moment. Regarding the suspected case of human infection of avian influenza, DS(FEH) said that to his understanding, it was not a H5N1 case, and the Centre for Health Protection was following up the case.

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Measures to control avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong

8. Referring to paragraph 5 of the paper, the Chairman asked the Administration to elaborate on the circumstances under which all live poultry in Hong Kong would be culled.

9. DS(FEH) said that as the Administration had explained at previous meetings, it would cull all chickens in Hong Kong, including all live poultry in farms, and at wholesale and retail markets, in the event of two confirmed H5N1 cases in two local poultry farms and thereafter, to cull and terminate the local poultry trade on a compulsory basis. If two confirmed H5N1 cases were found in retail markets, only those live poultry in markets would be culled. DS(FEH) further said that in view of the recent spread of avian influenza in parts of Europe, Southeast Asia and the Mainland, the Administration had stepped up precautionary measures to guard against outbreaks of avian influenza among local poultry. The Administration had reduced the current maximum licence capacity of local poultry farms from 3.7 million chickens to 2 million. It had also introduced a voluntary surrender scheme for live poultry traders to encourage them to surrender their licences/tenancies and cease operation permanently. Moreover, the Administration was preparing for the establishment of a regional poultry slaughtering hub in Hong Kong. DS(FEH) added that further measures to strengthen the defence against avian influenza would be introduced when necessary.

10. Mr WONG Kwok-hing said that the community was rather worried about the possible outbreak of avian influenza in Hong Kong. Mr WONG commented that there was nothing new in the measures taken by the Administration to prevent avian influenza outbreaks among local live poultry. To allay public concern, the Administration should set out its comprehensive plan for dealing with an outbreak, in particular the preventive measures for human infection of the H5N1 virus. Mr WONG further said that as the Inter-Departmental Action Co-ordinating Committee was headed by the Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, she should brief Members on the Administration's comprehensive plan for influenza pandemic.

11. DS(FEH) explained that the paper sought to set out the preventive measures against avian influenza outbreaks among local live poultry. To his understanding, the Panel on Health Services would discuss Government's preparedness for influenza pandemic at the meeting scheduled for 14 November 2005. DS(FEH) said that as explained on previous occasions, Government's plan included a three-level response system, i.e. Alert Response Level, Serious Response Level and Emergency Response Level. Given that avian influenza outbreaks in poultry population were reported in places outside Hong Kong, Hong Kong was now at the Alert Response Level. In the event of avian influenza case reported in Hong Kong, Hong Kong would activate the Serious Response Level. When there was evidence confirming human-to-human transmission of H5N1 virus, Hong Kong would activate the Emergency Response Level. DS(FEH) further said that the Inter-Departmental Action Co-ordinating

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Committee comprised representatives from over 30 government departments, and it would hold press conferences to answer questions from the media after its meetings.

12. Mr WONG Kwok-hing said that under the surveillance measures for wild birds, frontline staff in AFCD and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) would need to collect bird carcasses for avian influenza testing. Mr WONG asked whether free influenza vaccination would be provided to these frontline staff including contract staff.

13. Assistant Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (AD/FEHD) said that since 2004, free influenza vaccination had been arranged for poultry workers and those government officials, including contract staff, who had contact with live poultry in their daily work. DS(FEH) added that health guidelines had been issued to those who had contact with live poultry.

14. Mr TAM Yiu-chung asked if the Administration had studied whether the vaccine currently used in live chickens remained effective. Mr TAM further asked whether the Administration would consider providing more incentives for live poultry traders to surrender their licences/tenancies and cease operation permanently under the voluntary surrender scheme.

15. DS(FEH) responded that the vaccine currently used in live chickens was effective in preventing avian influenza outbreak, but there was heightened concern on the increasing risk of the H5N1 virus mutating and re-assorting into a strain that would result in human-to-human transmission. As such, the Administration considered it inappropriate to rely on vaccination for live chickens as the only long-term measure to prevent avian influenza outbreaks. Other measures such as regional/central slaughtering was under consideration.

16. DS(FEH) said that the conditions for granting ex-gratia payment to poultry farmers, wholesalers and retailers under the voluntary surrender scheme for live poultry traders were approved by the Finance Committee. DD/AFCD pointed out that since the introduction of the voluntary surrender scheme for poultry farmers in 2005, 24 of the some 140 poultry farm operators had applied for the scheme. DD/AFCD further pointed out that AFCD would provide necessary technical assistance and loans to poultry farmers to start organic farming or fish farming.

17. Mr TAM Yiu-chung said that government officials had given confusing messages to the public regarding the Administration's plan to deal with possible avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong. He considered that the Administration should appoint a spokesman to provide coordinated responses on the matter. Mr WONG Yung-kan shared Mr TAM's view. DS(FEH) said that the Administration would see whether its dissemination of messages to the public could be improved.

18. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that the stringent biosecurity measures adopted in local live poultry farms could adequately protect the farms from avian influenza

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infections, and overseas places had also made reference to the successful experience in Hong Kong.

19. DS(FEH) said that although vaccination currently used in chickens was proven effective in preventing H5N1 outbreaks among poultry, it could not totally prevent infection of H7 and H9 viruses. Therefore, there were still risks of avian influenza outbreaks in live poultry.

20. Mr Vincent FANG expressed reservations about the effectiveness of the preventive and surveillance measures put in place by the Administration to guard against avian influenza outbreaks. In view of the recent spread of avian influenza outside Hong Kong, the Administration should further step up the preventive measures against avian influenza outbreaks. Mr FANG raised the following concerns –

- (a) the Administration should ensure that no poultry meat would be smuggled into Hong Kong;
- (b) the Administration should increase the number of rest days in live poultry retail outlets to facilitate thorough cleansing of markets; and
- (c) the Administration should ban duck rearing in Mai Po to reduce the risk of infection of avian influenza by wild birds in the vicinity.

21. DS(FEH) said that while the Administration welcomed the suggestion of increasing the number of rest days in poultry retail outlets, the present arrangement of having one and a half cleansing days a month for markets was a compromise made among parties concerned. The Administration would discuss with poultry retailers the feasibility of further increasing the number of market rest days to enable regular cleansings. DD/AFCD added that daily cleansing had been carried out in poultry wholesale markets. DS(FEH) stressed that the Administration would take additional measures to tighten safeguards against avian influenza when necessary.

22. DD/AFCD said that of the five duck farms in Hong Kong which were located in Mai Po, two of them had already applied for voluntary surrender of licence to cease operation permanently. Given that ducks were natural carriers of H5 virus, the Administration would encourage duck farm operators to surrender their licences.

23. DS(FEH) said that the Administration had stepped up publicity at the border to remind people not to bring live poultry and poultry meat into Hong Kong. DD/AFCD said that the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) had also stepped up enforcement actions against “smuggling” of poultry into Hong Kong.

24. Mr Andrew CHENG said that there had been increase of avian influenza outbreaks in poultry and human infection cases in places outside Hong Kong. The

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World Health Organisation (WHO) had also warned that avian influenza would lead to morbidity and mortality of about 5 million to 150 million people in the world. Mr CHENG considered that in view of the increased risks of avian influenza, the Administration should put in place stringent preventive measures to guard against outbreaks in Hong Kong. Mr CHENG considered that the Administration should now activate temperature screening on arriving passengers at border control points as a preventive measure, and not wait until there were reported cases of human-to-human transmission.

25. DS(FEH) responded that a person infected with avian influenza did not necessarily have a fever, and therefore might not be detected by the device. Nevertheless, he would convey Mr Andrew CHENG's views to the Department of Health for consideration. DS(FEH) stressed that the Administration would adopt all necessary measures to strengthen defence against avian influenza.

26. Mr Andrew CHENG further said that to better safeguard public health, the Administration should advance the implementation of regional/central slaughtering of poultry. While the Administration had advised time and again that it was preparing for the establishment of a regional slaughtering hub in Hong Kong, the Administration had yet to provide the implementation timetable. Since the Administration had announced its plan to cull all chickens in Hong Kong and terminate the local live poultry trade when there were two confirmed H5N1 cases among local poultry, he did not understand why it had not yet started preparatory work for regional/central slaughtering.

27. DS(FEH) said that the Administration had completed the financial feasibility study on the scope for private sector participation in implementing regional slaughtering, and the preliminary findings indicated that the proposal was financially feasible. While the Administration was aware of divergent views on the proposal of regional/central slaughtering, the Administration was of the view that the option of regional slaughtering would strike a balance between safeguarding public health and protecting the interests of the catering industry and poultry industry.

28. Mr Tommy CHEUNG held the view that avian influenza outbreaks were largely spread by migratory birds which were carriers of the virus. To facilitate members' consideration of the long term policy on live poultry, the Administration should furnish members with more information on whether there were live poultry markets in those places where there were reported avian influenza outbreaks. Mr CHEUNG also urged the Administration to take stringent enforcement actions against smuggling of live poultry and poultry meat at the border control points.

29. Mr CHEUNG said that sentinel chickens in local chicken farms were not vaccinated. He asked whether the Administration would regard the infection of one sentinel chicken as a local avian influenza outbreak.

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30. DS(FEH) explained that following the introduction of a vaccination programme for all local chicken farms, sentinel chickens were used to detect the presence of the H5 avian influenza virus. The sentinel chickens would be infected only if the majority of chickens in the farm were infected. Therefore, the presence of avian influenza virus in sentinel chickens would be regarded as an outbreak of avian influenza in a local poultry farm.

31. In response to Mr Tommy CHEUNG and the Chairman, AD/AFCD said that since the introduction of vaccination programme for all local chicken farms, H5 avian influenza virus had not been found in sentinel chickens.

32. Dr Joseph LEE expressed disappointment that the Administration was still studying the proposal of regional/central slaughtering. He considered that the Administration should expedite the implementation timetable given the imminent threat of avian influenza outbreaks. Dr LEE pointed out that H5N1 virus would remain in poultry carcass. He was concerned that humans would be infected if poultry meat with H5N1 virus was improperly cooked and consumed. Dr LEE asked whether the Administration would conduct tests for H5N1 virus in imported poultry meat.

33. DS(FEH) said that the Administration considered a long-term plan to segregate humans from live poultry was necessary to reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong. DS(FEH) further said that importation of poultry meat was subject to the established inspection and quarantine procedures, and the list of processing plants supplying chilled meat to Hong Kong should be approved by FEHD. Moreover, the exporting countries/places should certify that the poultry meat was tested negative for H5 virus. Imported poultry meat was subject to monitoring under the regular food surveillance system and random food tests.

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34. At the request of Dr Joseph LEE, DS(FEH) agreed to provide information on the tests conducted for H5N1 virus in imported poultry meat.

35. Dr KWOK Ka-ki said that although the Administration had announced in the 2004 Policy Address that it was actively considering the proposal of regional/central slaughtering of live poultry, it was still unable to provide a timetable for the proposal. Dr KWOK asked under what circumstances would the Administration consider banning import of live poultry. Dr KWOK further said that in Macau, no live poultry were allowed to be kept at retail outlets overnight, i.e. poultry not sold at the end of the day would be killed. He considered that the Administration should adopt the same practice in Macau to reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreak at retail outlets.

36. DS(FEH) said that in Macau, only a small quantity of live poultry was kept at retail outlets, therefore it was not difficult for the retailers to kill the unsold poultry on a daily basis. Since there were 60 000 to 70 000 live chickens being sold at retail

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outlets each day in Hong Kong, killing unsold live chickens would give rise to financial loss of the retailers. The Administration would need to discuss with the poultry retailers if similar arrangement as in Macau was to be adopted in Hong Kong.

37. Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that the Administration should discuss with the poultry retailers the possibility of slaughtering unsold chickens at the close of business each day. It was also very important for the Administration to make clear to the poultry trade the long-term direction on regional/central slaughtering. Miss CHAN further said that while she was confident that local chickens were safe for human consumption, there were concerns about the mixing of chilled chicken and live chickens imported from the Mainland with those from unapproved sources during transportation. Miss CHAN added that with the increased risk of avian influenza, the Administration should remind those who had direct and close contact with live poultry to pay special attention to their personal hygiene.

38. DS(FEH) said that live poultry from the Mainland was supplied by registered farms where the chickens were vaccinated and tested free of H5 virus before consignment. These farms had also been inspected by FEHD officers. The live poultry from registered farms was transported in containers which were sealed after inspection by Mainland authorities. These chickens would also be tested for H5N1 virus at the border control points by Hong Kong authorities. DS(FEH) further said that the Administration exercised control at source in respect of chilled poultry meat. FEHD staff would inspect the operation and environmental conditions of processing plants in the Mainland and the chilled poultry meat would be tested for H5N1 virus.

39. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that in Mainland, information on avian influenza outbreaks was disseminated by the Ministry of Agriculture, while that on human infection cases of avian influenza was disseminated by the Ministry of Health. He asked the Administration to make reference to the spokesman arrangements in the Mainland for conveying clear messages on avian influenza to the public.

40. DS(FEH) responded that Hong Kong had a different government structure for public health matters. SHWF had overall responsibilities for public health and he would make statements on avian influenza matters.

41. Mr Tommy CHEUNG opposed to the Administration's plan of culling of all live poultry when there was an avian influenza outbreak in two local farms, since existing preventive measures, such as daily cleansing of wholesale markets, had proven effective. Mr CHEUNG pointed out that it would cause financial loss to poultry retailers if they were required to kill all unsold chickens and conduct cleansing on a daily basis. To reduce the number of unsold live chickens kept at retail markets overnight, the Administration should allow more flexibility for the daily supply of Mainland live chickens, so that poultry traders could adjust their daily imports according to the demand.

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42. DS(FEH) said that poultry traders had previously raised objection to the proposal of conducting daily cleansing at retail outlets. The Administration would further discuss with poultry retailers tightening hygiene requirements for retail outlets. DS(FEH) further said that the daily supply of live chickens was maintained at a level of no more than 30 000. Poultry traders could decide to import live chickens below this level.

43. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that all imported chickens from registered farms in the Mainland were required to be vaccinated against avian influenza. He considered that the Administration should discuss with the Mainland authorities extending the compulsory vaccination to all chickens reared on the Mainland.

44. DS(FEH) said that all chickens imported from the Mainland came from registered farms and were vaccinated for H5 virus, chickens reared for local consumption in the Mainland were not subject to compulsory vaccination. Although the Administration could convey Mr CHEUNG's suggestion to the Mainland authorities for consideration, it was ultimately a matter for the Mainland authorities to decide.

45. Mr Vincent FANG noted that only three duck farms remained in operation in Hong Kong. To reduce the risk of infection of ducks by wild or migratory birds, the Administration should encourage these farm operators to surrender their licences and cease operation permanently by offering more attractive compensation to them. Mr FANG considered that mandatory surrender of licences should be required if there was such a need. He asked whether the Administration would provide compensation to the poultry traders if they were required to cease operation on compulsory basis.

46. DS(FEH) said that the Administration would continue to encourage the duck farm operators to surrender their licences under the voluntary surrender scheme for poultry traders. DS(FEH) further said that statutory compensation payable to live poultry traders was \$38 for each chicken culled, i.e. \$34 for each chicken culled plus an ex-gratia element at \$4 for each chicken.

47. The Chairman said that according to media reports, SHWF had stated that the Administration would consider closing the border control points if there was an outbreak of avian influenza. The Chairman asked under what circumstances would the border control points be closed.

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48. DS(FEH) said that to his understanding, SHWF made such statement when responding to enquiries on a hypothetical situation that there was a local outbreak of avian influenza. SHWF was referring to the worst scenario where there was evidence of effective human-to-human infection under which the Administration might need to control passenger flow at the border.

Backyard poultry keeping

49. Mr Vincent FANG considered that the Administration should consider banning backyard poultry keeping where poultry were reared without licences, given that household poultry keepers would not adopt adequate preventive measures against avian influenza.

50. DD/AFCD said that the law provided exemption for any person who owned or kept no more than 20 poultry in or on his premises, without the need to apply for a licence. Nevertheless, the Administration appealed to these households to hand in their backyard poultry voluntarily to AFCD with a view to reducing such backyard poultry keeping activities. DS(FEH) added that the Administration was considering introducing legislation to ban backyard poultry keeping in Hong Kong.

51. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that as a precaution against avian influenza outbreaks, he agreed to the proposal to ban backyard poultry keeping.

52. Dr KWOK Ka-ki said that since backyard poultry keeping was not a commercial activity and but would pose threat on public health, the Administration should stop such activities. The Administration should consider extending the voluntary surrender scheme for poultry traders to backyard poultry keepers, in order to encourage them to cease such activities.

53. DS(FEH) said that as he had explained earlier, the existing law provided exemption for a person who kept no more than 20 poultry in or on his premises. The Administration was considering introducing legislative amendments to ban backyard poultry keeping. However, there would be technical problems to extend the voluntary surrender scheme to individual households, as the banning of backyard poultry keeping would need to go through the legislative process.

54. The Chairman asked whether other members had any views on the introduction of legislative amendments to ban backyard poultry keeping activities in Hong Kong. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that he did not object to the proposal, but the Administration should consider the implications of the legislative proposal on persons who kept birds and poultry as pets.

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55. The Chairman said that the Administration should provide more information on the proposal to facilitate the Panel to further discuss the issue.

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Surveillance measures for migratory and wild birds

56. Mr TAM Yiu-chung expressed concern that H5 virus would be transmitted by migratory birds to local wild birds and spread to local live poultry. He asked about the surveillance mechanism for detecting abnormalities in wild birds.

57. DS(FEH) said that it was difficult to monitor wild birds, but the Administration had adopted surveillance measures for wild birds. DS(FEH) further said that AFCD staff had been conducting daily surveillance of wild birds in Mai Po Nature Reserve to detect any abnormalities. In addition, AFCD had posted a notice at the entrance of Mai Po Nature Reserve reminding the public to maintain good personal hygiene, and avoid contact with wild birds.

58. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that he had previously raised concern about the risks of wild birds transmitting avian influenza virus. Mr WONG asked why samples of wild birds were tested for H5 virus only, whereas imported birds were tested for H5 and H7 viruses. Mr WONG pointed out that cultivated fish farmers operated in Long Valley had close contact with wild birds which had increased the chance of infection. To better protect the health of these farmers, the Administration should consider providing free influenza vaccination for them.

59. DS(FEH) said that H7 virus was commonly found in migratory birds which were not frequently seen in Southeast Asia including Hong Kong, while H9 virus was commonly found in chickens. Therefore, Hong Kong currently only tested for H5 virus in wild birds. Assistant Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation added that AFCD had conducted sample tests on wild birds in Mai Po Nature Reserve since 2004. If the samples were tested positive for H5 virus, they would be further tested for H7 and H9 viruses.

60. DS(FEH) further said that the Administration considered it more practical to step up surveillance of wild birds and remind the public to observe the guidelines on visiting the Reserve area, instead of conducting massive culling of wild birds. The Administration would consider closing the Reserve area and birds parks temporarily if necessary.

61. Miss CHAN Yuen-han pointed out that as reported in the media, wild birds had close contact with ducks reared in duck farms in the New Territories. The contact between wild birds and poultry would pose risks of outbreaks of avian influenza in Hong Kong.

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62. DS(FEH) said that the Administration was aware of the risk of wild birds transmitting avian influenza viruses to poultry. The duck farmers were therefore encouraged to surrender their licences under the voluntary surrender scheme. DD/AFCD added that there were only a few duck farms currently operating in Hong Kong. The ducks reared in these farms were not sold at retail markets. To reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreak, the Administration was discussing with the duck farm operators about voluntary surrender of their licences.

63. Mr WONG Kwok-hing commented that the Administration did not mention surveillance measures for wild birds in its paper. Mr WONG pointed out that wild birds, in particular pigeons, were commonly found in urban areas. The risk of human infection would be increased if pigeons were carriers of H5N1 virus. He wondered whether the Administration would adopt any preventive measures in this respect.

64. DS(FEH) said that the surveillance measures of AFCD included testing samples of pigeons. So far, all the samples had been tested negative for H5 avian influenza. The risk of pigeons having pathogenic H5N1 virus was low. As feeding pigeons at public places was a cleanliness offence, FEHD would step up enforcement actions in this respect. He appealed to the public not to feed pigeons at public places as such act would attract more pigeons gathering at public places. DS(FEH) further said that the effectiveness of H5 vaccination for pigeons was not yet proven. Pigeon farmers were also encouraged to surrender their licences under the voluntary surrender scheme.

65. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that the Mainland authorities had mapped out the routes of migratory birds. He asked whether the Administration would also let the public know the routes of migratory birds in Hong Kong. DD/AFCD said that as Hong Kong was located at the southeastern part of the Mainland, the routes of migratory birds were similar to those birds found in Southeast China. AFCD had made available such information for general reference.

66. Mr Andrew CHENG noted that AFCD and the University of Hong Kong had jointly tested about 7 000 bird samples for H5 avian influenza virus in the first nine months in 2005, as compared to about 14 800 samples of wild birds and birds tested in 2004. Mr CHENG asked about the reason for the comparatively less samples tested in 2005 when the risk of avian influenza outbreaks was heightened. Mr CHENG also expressed concern about the enforcement actions against birds sold at retail outlets without permits issued by AFCD.

67. DD/AFCD said that AFCD would take more samples of wild birds and birds for H5 avian influenza virus tests in the light of the development of avian influenza outbreaks in other places and seasonal changes. DD/AFCD further said that AFCD had stepped up inspections of the sale of birds without permits, and C&ED had also stepped up enforcement against importing birds without permits.

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68. Mr FANG asked whether the Administration had discussed with WHO measures to be taken if wild birds were confirmed to be vectors for transmission of the avian influenza virus.

69. DS(FEH) said that the Administration had maintained close contact with WHO on the development of transmission of avian influenza virus by wild birds. To guard against the risk of transmission of avian influenza by wild birds, the Administration had stepped up surveillance measures for wild birds. The public was reminded to keep away from and avoid contact with wild birds.

70. Mr Vincent FANG said that in view of the threat posed by avian influenza, this Panel and the Panel on Health Services should hold a joint meeting to discuss the comprehensive plan for avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong. The Chairman and Dr KWOK Ka-ki (who was Chairman of Panel on Health Services) agreed to the suggestion. The Chairman said that members would be informed of the date of the joint Panel meeting later.

(Post-meeting note : The joint meeting of the Panel and Panel on Health Services was held on 5 November 2005.)

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

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
26 April 2006