

For Discussion on the Special Meeting on 16 June 2008

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES TAKEN TO ARREST THE POSSIBLE SPREAD OF AVIAN FLU VIRUS AMONG POULTRY

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the precautionary measures taken by the Government to arrest the possible spread of avian influenza virus among poultry and to protect public health.

Existing Preventive Measures Against Avian Influenza

2. Over the past years, we have adopted a series of preventive measures with a view to reducing the risk brought by avian influenza. These measures include the introduction of a registered farm system in the Mainland for live poultry supplied to Hong Kong, and the adoption of a stringent import protocol and the implementation of various measures implemented in local farms, the wholesale market and retail outlets in Hong Kong. The details are set out at Annex.

Detection of the H5N1 Virus in Public Markets

3. On 7 June 2008, some faecal samples taken from cages of three poultry stalls in Po On Road Market in Sham Shui Po during the regular surveillance of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) conducted on 3 June were tested positive of the H5N1 avian influenza virus. In the morning of the same day, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) inspected 64 markets with live poultry stalls and no abnormality was found. The AFCD also inspected all 50 local farms with no abnormality identified.

4. In view of the situation, the Secretary for Food and Health immediately raised the original alert response level to serious response level and decided to adopt a series of measures to protect public health,

including to immediately cull and destroy over 2 000 poultry in the Po On Road Market on 7 June. The other measures adopted were to –

- (i) step up inspection at retail outlets, the wholesale market and local farms;
- (ii) advance the market rest day (implemented twice a month at all live poultry retail outlets) from 11 June to 9 June in order to thoroughly cleanse the retail outlets. All unsold chickens in the retail outlets were slaughtered around noon on 9 June before commencement of the rest day;
- (iii) conduct thorough cleansing at retail markets and the wholesale market;
- (iv) send staff to Mainland registered farms and processing plants with the aim to ascertain that chickens and poultry meat for supply to Hong Kong would not be affected;
- (v) suspend import of live chickens and local farms would stop despatching chickens to the market;
- (vi) enhance surveillance of human infection of avian influenza; and
- (vii) step up efforts in cracking down on smuggling of live poultry.

5. Since then, the AFCD and FEHD have been actively tracing the source of avian influenza virus found in the Po On Road Market. From the invoices of the affected stalls, AFCD and FEHD staff have traced back to the wholesalers, then traced further so far to three local farms and eight Mainland registered farms which supply chickens to Hong Kong. According to the AFCD and FEHD, there was no abnormality in the three local farms that supply chickens to the wholesalers involved and the eight Mainland registered farms concerned. The Mainland inspection and quarantine authorities also confirmed that there were no abnormalities among the Mainland farms involved.

6. On 11 June, the environmental samples of three more retail markets (namely Luen Wo Hui Market in North District, Yan Oi Market in Tuen Mun District and Ap Lei Chau Market in Southern District) taken on 7 June, as well as samples from one more stall of the Po On Road Market, were tested positive of H5N1 avian influenza.

7. As more than one market were found to have samples tested positive of H5N1 avian influenza virus, the virus might have the possibility of accumulating and spreading. To prevent the possible spread of the virus, the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation declared on 11 June all retail outlets where live poultry were sold as infected places and ordered the culling of all poultry in these retail outlets. The number of market stalls and fresh provision shops affected are around 470 in total. By the end of the operation on 11 June, about 3 000 live poultry were culled and disposed of, along with over 4 700 dressed poultry and 12 700 chilled poultry surrendered by the retailers.

8. We also decided to suspend temporarily live chicken imports from the Mainland for 21 days with effect from 11 June, with reference to the guidelines of the World Organisation for Animal Health. At the same time, local farms would stop dispatching chickens to the market.

9. A Task Force involving the Customs and Excise Department, FEHD and AFCD was formed in December 2007 to mount joint efforts in combating smuggling activities involving live poultry, live animals and food. Since the incident in the Po On Road Market on 7 June, the three departments concerned are conducting a joint investigation into whether the presence of the H5N1 virus might have been caused by smuggled chickens. The joint investigation has been extended to cover the other three public markets since 11 June. Actions have also been stepped up to deter poultry smuggling activities.

10. The H5N1 avian influenza virus was identified in the environmental swabs taken from four retail markets. So far, we have not found any dead chicken that was tested positive of H5N1 avian influenza. There is also no evidence of human infection of avian influenza.

11. The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) has informed the Hospital Authority, private hospitals and private doctors and requested them to step up surveillance for possible human cases of avian influenza, and no cases have been reported so far. We have paid particular

attention to the health condition of the poultry workers and FEHD staff involved in the culling operation. The CHP has put these workers and FEHD staff under medical surveillance. The CHP has also set up a hotline (2125 1122) manned by healthcare staff to answer enquiries from the public.

Next Steps

12. The detection of avian influenza virus in a number of retail markets indicated that the current monitoring system was effective. But this also showed that there are inadequacies in the preventive and control measures at the retail level. In view of this, the Government will review the supply chain of chickens, including the bio-security measures in farms and the tenancy agreement conditions (for market poultry stalls) and licensing conditions (for licensed poultry fresh provision shops) of retail outlets.

13. Meanwhile, we are actively tracing the source of infection and have not ruled out any possibilities. As indicated in paragraph 9 above, a joint investigation team consisting of the Customs and Exercise Department, AFCD and FEHD has been set up to investigate whether the issue was related to smuggled chickens and also to step up anti-smuggling efforts. Ten more Mainland registered farms which supply chickens to Hong Kong have been traced from the invoices of the three stalls and audit visit by FEHD is now being arranged. The investigation also traced back to 21 local farms and AFCD would conduct further testing on faecal samples collected from these farms.

14. Wholesale and retail markets have to be thoroughly disinfected and cleansed. We will discuss with the traders on how to enhance preventive measures at the retail level. Our primary concern is to safeguard public health. In the absence of adequate improvement measures being introduced at the retail level, we do not rule out the need to extend the suspension of live chicken import beyond 21-days.

15. As local chicken farms have adopted stringent biosecurity measures and operated in enclosed environment, they are relatively safe. The environmental samples taken in farms so far were also tested

negative of the H5N1 virus. Hence, there is no need to cull all chickens in local farms for the time being.

16. In addition, local experts do not find any signs of virus mutation. The vaccines used on chickens for preventive purpose are still effective.

Ex-gratia Payment

17. We have met with the poultry trade associations, including poultry farmers, wholesalers and retailers on 8, 11 and 13 June to listen to their requests for financial assistance and discuss possible preventive and control measure against the H5N1 virus, including the clearing of all live poultry from the wholesale market and retail outlets every day. We will consider the views received with a view to formulating a suitable compensation package and implementing enhanced preventive and control measures in due course.

Food and Health Bureau
14 June 2008

Preventive measures on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

Details of the preventive measures on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) adopted by the Administration are set out below.

Registered Farm System

2. A registered farm system has been adopted since 1998 whereby live poultry supplied to Hong Kong from the Mainland would only come from registered farms, mainly in Guangdong Province. In these farms, strict biosecurity measures, traceability arrangements and drug residue monitoring are imposed. A vaccination programme for poultry against H5 avian influenza has also been introduced since 2003. The supply of chilled and frozen chicken and fresh poultry eggs to Hong Kong followed a similar registered farm system since 2002 and 2007 respectively.

3. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department sends inspection teams to registered poultry farms on a regular basis. So far, the registered farms have a good track record of compliance.

Import Protocol

4. All live poultry exported from the Mainland to Hong Kong are subject to stringent import protocol. The poultry destined for export are put under quarantine for five days and are required to pass blood tests prior to leaving the farms. All live poultry destined for Hong Kong must be accompanied by an official animal health certificate confirming an adequate immune status against H5 avian influenza virus and that the poultry are free of clinical signs of diseases and have been inspected by official veterinarians prior to export.

5. The live chickens imported from the Mainland are subject to clinical inspection at Man Kam To Livestock Inspection Station, including the taking of blood and faecal samples for tests and verification of official animal health certificates. After inspection, the truck carrying the live chicken is sealed and an “inspection certificate” will be issued to the driver for further verification at the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary

Poultry Wholesale Market (CSWTPWM).

6. When the truck arrives at CSWTPWM, the seal will be broken and the “inspection certificate” will be collected. Labels bearing the truck registration number will be put on cages to help make sure that there is no mixing of different consignments during the waiting period. The chickens will be inspected again. Only chicken with negative results for the H5 avian influenza antigen testing will be released for sale in retail outlets.

Measures adopted in Hong Kong

7. Enhanced biosecurity measures have been adopted by local farms since early 2002. A comprehensive vaccination programme for poultry against H5 avian influenza virus was also put in place in 2003. At the retail level, we introduced a monthly ‘rest day’ arrangement for all poultry stalls in public markets and fresh provision shops selling live poultry in July 2001. All live poultry would be slaughtered before the rest day and the premises would be thoroughly cleansed. Since March 2003, we have enhanced the arrangement to two ‘rest days’ per month. The rest days in retail outlets synchronized with the rest days in the CSWTPWM during which would also be thoroughly cleansed. Besides, the Administration banned keeping of backyard poultry in February 2006. Continuous enforcement action is taken in this regard.