

**For discussion
on 18 December 2008**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Actions taken in response to the avian flu incident in December 2008

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the actions taken by the Administration to arrest the possible spread of avian influenza virus among poultry following the detection of H5N1 virus in dead chickens found in a local farm.

Detection of the H5N1 Virus in a Local Chicken Farm

2. On 8 December 2008, a local chicken farmer of a farm¹ located at Ha Tsuen near Lau Fau Shan, Yuen Long (the index farm) reported abnormal death of some 60 chickens in a breeder shed to the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). In response to the report, a team of AFCD staff immediately conducted inspection at the farm and found that another 60 sentinel chickens from two batches in the chicken shed nearby were also dying. Three chicken carcasses and 120 chicken faecal samples were collected from the farm concerned for testing of avian flu virus. These samples were subsequently found positive of avian flu on 9 December 2008.

3. In view of the situation, the Secretary for Food and Health (SFH) immediately convened an inter-departmental steering meeting on 9 December 2008. Upon the advice of the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DAFC), SFH raised the original Alert Response Level to Serious Response Level on the same day. The meeting also decided to take a series of actions according to the contingency plan for Serious Response Level to prevent the spread of the virus.

¹ The licensing capacity of the index farm is 102 000 chickens and its actual rearing capacity as of 8 December 2008 was around 68 000 chickens.

Actions Taken

4. To prevent the possible spread of the virus, we have taken a series of measures at all levels including farms, wholesale market and retail outlets as follows –

Culling of poultry

- (i) All live poultry (around 68 000 chickens) in the index farm were culled and destroyed.
- (ii) In accordance with guidelines of the World Organisation for Animal Health and Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, live poultry within three-kilometre radius of the index farm are recommended to be culled to prevent the spread of virus. Hence, all live poultry (around 18 000 chickens) in another chicken farm were also culled and destroyed.
- (iii) Although no live poultry had been sent from the index farm to the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market on 8 and 9 December 2008, some chickens from the other farm within three-kilometre radius of the index farm were found in the wholesale market on 9 December 2008. In view of this, as a precautionary measure, all live poultry including around 10 000 chickens and 7 000 minor poultry in the wholesale market were culled and destroyed.

Suspension of local and imported live poultry supply

- (iv) All local farms stopped dispatching live poultry to the wholesale market starting from 9 December 2008. Importation of live poultry and birds were also suspended from noon of 9 December.

Testing of live poultry in other local farms

- (v) During the suspension period of local chicken supply, inspection and intensive testing of live poultry in all remaining local farms would be conducted. So far, the test results are negative.

Stepping up surveillance on live poultry and birds

- (vi) Surveillance and sample testing on birds in the Yuen Po Street Bird Garden has been stepped up. The Ocean Park, the World

Wild Fund Hong Kong and the Leisure and Cultural Service Department were requested to step up their biosecurity measures against avian flu in their venues or parks. As the Hong Kong Wetland Park and the Yuen Long Aviary Pagoda are located within the three-kilometre radius of the index farm, the Pagoda and also the outdoor section of the Wetland Park were closed for 21 days starting from 9 December.

Disinfection of wholesale market and retail outlets

- (vii) All live poultry retail outlets were inspected on 9 December to ensure that live poultry were slaughtered by 8 pm that day in compliance with the law.
- (viii) The wholesale market and all live poultry retail outlets were thoroughly cleansed and disinfected.

Distribution of Tamiflu and enhanced surveillance of human infection

- (ix) Tamiflu was offered to AFCD's culling teams and other persons with possible direct exposure to infected poultry (including persons living/working on the two local farms concerned). Tamiflu was also offered to wholesale poultry market workers and cullers. The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) has put the exposed poultry farmers and workers from the two farms concerned under medical surveillance for 14 days. Six workers who had direct contact with the dead chickens were admitted to the Hospital Authority Infectious Disease Centre at Princess Margaret Hospital for observation for the first 7 days.
- (x) Hospitals and private medical practitioners were reminded to report any suspected cases to the CHP. The CHP has also set up a hotline (2125 1122) manned by healthcare staff to answer enquiries from the public.

Setting up of Investigation Groups

5. At the moment, there is no scientific evidence showing that the virus has mutated. There is also no sign of any human to human transmission. Nevertheless, to better prepare ourselves against the risks of any possible avian flu in the future, we have set up two investigation groups consisting of representatives from various departments and external professionals. These two groups are responsible for conducting epidemiological study of avian flu outbreak on the index farm and the

vaccine study respectively.

6. The investigation group on epidemiological study will do an in-depth examination of the biosecurity measures of the index farm. It will take a thorough look at the preventive measures taken by the farm, as well as the management and operation of the farm to see if there are any shortcomings. The group will also try to identify the source of infection and the channel that the virus could have got into the farm. Besides, the group will review and revise the guidelines on biosecurity measures of farms so as to assist the farmers in better protecting the safety of the chickens.

7. On the other hand, the investigation group on vaccine study will be responsible for conducting research and tests on the efficacy of the existing H5N2 vaccine used in Hong Kong. The group will also study the effectiveness and quality of alternative vaccines to see if they are suitable for use in Hong Kong. The information gathered and the group's recommendations will facilitate the Administration in the choice of vaccine most suitable for Hong Kong's circumstances.

8. It is expected that the investigation group on epidemiological study will complete a preliminary report in two to three weeks time and submit a full report in two months. For the investigation group on vaccine study, it is expected that a preliminary report will be submitted in two to three months time and a full report as early as possible within a year.

Advice Sought

9. Members' views are sought on the above.

Food and Health Bureau
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