

**For discussion
on 11 January 2011**

**Legislative Council Panel on
Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Proposed Creation of a Principal Veterinary Officer Rank
in the Veterinary Officer Grade
and Proposed Creation of a Permanent Principal Veterinary Officer Post
in the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department**

PURPOSE

This paper seeks Members' views on the following proposals-

- (a) the creation of a new rank of Principal Veterinary Officer (PVO) pitched at D1 level in the Veterinary Officer (VO) grade; and
- (b) the creation of a permanent PVO post in the Inspection and Quarantine Branch (IQB) of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD).

BACKGROUND

2. At present, the VO grade is a non-directorate professional grade, comprising the VO rank at the entry level and the promotion rank of Senior Veterinary Officer (SVO) serving in three departments, namely, AFCD, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). The Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DAFC) is the Head of the VO grade.

3. VOs at the entry rank are mainly deployed on work relating to investigation, diagnosis, prevention and control of animal diseases and zoonoses, monitoring and enhancement of animal welfare, inspection of animals and animal products for import and export, and licensing and enforcement of relevant legislation. SVOs are mainly deployed to take charge of the relevant units in AFCD, FEHD and LCSD and are responsible for providing professional services and advice on animal diseases, prevention of cruelty to animals, control of import of livestock, protection of wild birds and mammals, food safety and animal management in parks. SVOs are supervised by the respective Assistant Directors in the three departments, who are not required to possess veterinary training.

4. Over the past two decades, the work of the VO and SVO ranks has increased in terms of scope, workload and complexity. The Standing Commission on Civil Service Salaries and Conditions of Service (Standing Commission) concluded Grade Structure Reviews (GSRs) of selected civilian grades including the VO grade in 2008 and considered that a strong public veterinary service was critical to the provision of high level professional advice in the areas of food safety, public health, animal welfare and management. Some key factors contributing to the increasing challenges were highlighted below –

- (a) Food safety – There has been an increasing emphasis on “farm to table” food safety, resulting in a greater need for closer liaison and co-operation with the Mainland authorities and overseas food producers and exporters. It is also increasingly prevalent to have animal parts in food and consumer products for import and export. Consequently, the workload in licensing and control of animal products has increased tremendously.
- (b) Public health – In view of the fact that avian influenza outbreak and other international public health crises affect Hong Kong and the Mainland, prevention and control of emerging infectious diseases are accorded high priority. The globalisation of trade has also increased the risks of trans-boundary movements of exotic and emerging disease agents. With these developments, the VO grade has to play an increasingly important role in managing animal disease outbreak, providing accurate and timely information on animal diseases and ensuring rapid diagnosis and effective prevention of emerging infectious diseases with public health implications.
- (c) Animal management and animal welfare – With the increasing pet population in Hong Kong, there is a growing demand for government veterinary services, particularly in regulating the pet trade, stepping up urban animal management, safeguarding animal welfare and promoting public education on responsible pet ownership.
- (d) Higher quality and professional standards – With the advent of science and technology, veterinary science has become increasingly sophisticated with more specialisation (e.g. laboratory-based activities) using advanced techniques and requiring higher standards in compliance with the quality management and accreditation regulation by the Veterinary Surgeons Board of Hong Kong.

Given the important role of the VO grade in public health and food safety, the Standing Commission considered there was a need for more senior and well-experienced VO grade members to lead the grade and represent Hong Kong in liaison and coordination with senior members of the profession in other jurisdictions. The Standing Commission also commented that there seemed to be a prima facie case to review whether it was functionally justified to establish another tier beyond the SVO level to provide high-level professional advice to guide the development of the relevant policies and implement the appropriate measures.

5. To follow up on the Standing Commission's recommendation on the VO grade as mentioned in paragraph 4 above, AFCD, being responsible for the overall management of the VO grade, conducted a review in early 2009 and concluded that it was necessary to create a PVO rank at the D1 level having regard to the increased complexity of work which calls for enhanced professional leadership in the grade, the strengthened regulatory function of the veterinary profession, as well as the need for greater professional input in grade management. In August 2009, the Standing Committee on Directorate Salaries and Conditions of Service gave in-principle agreement to the proposed creation of a D1 rank for the VO grade.

PROPOSALS

6. We propose to create a new rank of PVO pitched at D1 level in the VO grade to provide high-level professional service and technical advice on public veterinary matters. We also propose to create one permanent PVO post in the IQB of the AFCD to provide strengthened directorate input and dedicated support for the planning and supervision of animal disease control and animal management services.

JUSTIFICATIONS

Need for a New PVO Rank

I. Increased complexity of duties

7. The duties and responsibilities of the VO grade have increased in recent years, both in scope and complexity. This is mainly due to the emergence of new and complex animal-originated diseases, the increased awareness of animal issues in the community, more pressing demands for review of the existing policies and guidelines, and the rapid advancement in veterinary knowledge. Some of these duties and responsibilities, as explained in paragraphs 8 to 15 below, exceed the scope of a senior professional (i.e. SVO) and should more appropriately be discharged by directorate officers.

(a) Threat of emerging animal diseases to public health

8. Scientists have established that about three-quarters of emerging diseases affecting humans over the past two decades originated from animal sources. Examples are avian influenza H5 and H7, West Nile, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (commonly known as mad cow disease), nipah virus, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Rift Valley fever, ebola virus and monkeypox. Almost all of these diseases carry a high fatality rate in infected humans. To better protect Hong Kong against the spread of these diseases, the VO grade not only has to provide veterinary services that can rapidly detect emerging animal diseases and effectively contain their spread to humans, but also to exercise professional judgment and make decision from a broader perspective in the face of fast-developing incidents and, sometimes, public health crises.

In the international arena, there is also a gradual shift towards a "One Health" approach, in which the complex interface between humans, animals and the environment has to be considered when preparing for controlling and preventing emerging infectious diseases. We therefore need a professionally qualified person at the directorate level of the VO grade to provide expert veterinary advice to ensure continued oversight of the emerging zoonotic diseases, and to liaise with professionals in other disciplines in safeguarding Hong Kong's food safety and public health.

(b) Policy formulation and decision making

9. Timely professional veterinary advice, at the strategic level, has become indispensable in the formulation of policy on zoonotic diseases prevention and management. This goes beyond what a senior professional can deliver. Here in Hong Kong, both the VO and SVO tiers primarily focus on the day-to-day provision of veterinary services covering regulation of food animals, animal welfare management and enforcement against cruelty against animals. As there is currently only one directorate officer in IQB, i.e. the Assistant Director for Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (Inspection and Quarantine), who has veterinary training, both the operational and policy development oversight responsibilities fall on him. In order to ensure that Hong Kong is kept abreast of the best practices in respect of zoonotic disease prevention and to ensure that our policies on food animal regulation and animal welfare progress with the times, we need to strengthen our directorate veterinary input in the IQB of AFCD. In many other jurisdictions, the public veterinary service is structured with multiple levels of professional expertise and administrative experience. For example, the Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has a five-tier structure, with each tier carrying distinct managerial and professional responsibilities. At the top level, there are experienced veterinarians with rich professional experience and considerable administrative and leadership skills to steer and manage their public veterinary services. The creation of a directorate rank in the VO grade would fill the gap in our existing structure and help strengthen professional input in policy formulation and decision making on veterinary matters.

(c) Participation in and contribution to the international forum

10. Ensuring the safety of food products of animal origin (e.g. meat, honey and milk) is a common concern of the international community. Liaison and cooperation with veterinary authorities in different jurisdictions as well as participation in and contribution to discussions of international bodies (e.g. the World Organisation for Animal Health and the World Health Organisation) are an integral part of our public veterinary service. Given the importance of the subject matters and the level of professional input required, many jurisdictions are represented at international forums by their veterinary officers with rich professional experience and considerable administrative and leadership skills in running public veterinary service. These exceed the requirements of a SVO. The proposed PVO, being a directorate officer with profound professional experience, would be in a more suitable position to represent the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (or as part of the Mainland delegation) at meetings of relevant international bodies for protecting and promoting the interests of

Hong Kong; and to effectively maintain a close network with the Mainland and international authorities/organisations in handling public health issues requiring high-level veterinary involvement.

(d) Increasing awareness of animal welfare and management issues

11. In recent years, there is increasing concern about animal welfare and animal management issues in the community, as evidenced by the recent Legislative Council (LegCo) motion debate on 3 November 2010 on “Formulating an animal-friendly policy”. Various suggestions have been put up by LegCo Members and animal welfare and animal rights concern groups, such as introducing additional legislative measures to prevent animal cruelty and promote animal welfare, enhancing the regulation of pet shops and breeders, subsidising neutering of pets, and introducing a “Trap-Neuter-Release/Return” programme. At the same time, however, many people are gravely concerned about the danger, nuisance and environmental hygiene problems caused by stray animals and urge AFCD to remove them from their neighbourhood. In this regard, over 20,000 complaints relating to nuisance caused by dogs and cats not under proper control are received annually. AFCD is required to constantly review the relevant legislation, operational procedures and enforcement guidelines, etc. and to explain government policies to various quarters. We need a directorate rank officer who possesses both professional and management experience as well as the sensitivity regarding community aspirations to take forward the planning and implementation of various services on animal management and the enhancement of animal welfare.

(e) Rapid expansion of veterinary knowledge

12. Veterinary science is fast developing and there is a trend towards sub-specialisation that a manager without appropriate technical and professional knowledge will find difficult to understand and interpret. For example, veterinary laboratory science now involves the application of advanced techniques for the diagnosis of various animal diseases. The consequential requirements for laboratory quality management and international laboratory accreditation are becoming increasingly complex. Our public veterinary service must be able to keep abreast of fast-changing developments in the various fields of veterinary science and respond to them appropriately. The assessment of these trends and the identification of suitable training opportunities to suit the needs of an evolving public veterinary service require a dedicated directorate officer in the veterinary field with sufficient international exposure and a good grasp of the profession’s needs, especially in the public sector context.

II. Professional input in grade management

13. We anticipate that the operational demands on the VO grade service will continue to rise in the years to come. It is important to strengthen the management, promote the professionalism and career prospect of the grade to meet the challenges ahead. At present, DAFC is the head of the VO grade and is assisted by the Deputy Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation and the ADAFC of the IQB in the grade management work. As the ADAFC post is an “open” directorate post which can

be filled by officers of either the VO grade or other professional grades, the officer is not required to possess veterinary training. In view of the growing complexity and specialised nature of the VO grade's work, a professional veterinarian at the directorate level, underpinning the ADAFC of the IQB, can provide dedicated support and advice to strengthen the management of the VO grade.

III. Regulatory function of the veterinary profession

14. The Veterinary Surgeons Board (VSB) is a statutory body established under the Veterinary Surgeons Registration Ordinance (Cap. 529) for the regulation of the practice of veterinary surgeons in Hong Kong. The VSB is responsible for, among other things, setting the qualification standards for registration as veterinary surgeons, making rules for professional conduct and discipline of registered veterinary surgeons, and dealing with complaints against registered veterinary surgeons.

15. To assist the VSB in carrying out its statutory functions, the VSB Secretariat, which is staffed by AFCD, provides executive and secretarial support. In addition, given its experience in handling animal disease and welfare issues, AFCD provides impartial professional veterinary advice upon request to the VSB. As the number of veterinary surgeons has surged from about 190 in September 2000 to some 560 in end 2010 and, coupled with the increasing trend of pet ownership and heightened awareness of animal welfare in recent years, the range and depth of issues on which the VSB requires AFCD's professional input have been on the rise. The provision of a PVO rank at the D1 level will enable AFCD to maintain the level of quality professional veterinary service to the VSB.

Creation of a Permanent PVO Post in AFCD

16. At present, there are seven divisions under IQB which is headed by an ADAFC. The existing organisation chart of AFCD is at **Enclosure 1**. Given the increased complexity of duties and rapid expansion of veterinary knowledge as mentioned above, the branch head is overloaded and there is an operational need for him to be assisted by a PVO with the necessary professional knowledge and experience to oversee animal management/welfare and animal/public health measures, as well as constantly develop improvement initiatives taking into account changing community expectations and the potential threat of existing and emerging zoonotic and animal diseases. The new PVO will directly supervise the Animal Health Division, the Veterinary Laboratory Division, the Animal Management (Operations) Division and the Animal Management (Development) Division. These divisions are primarily involved in the control of animal diseases, the handling of animal welfare and animal management issues with the most imminent needs for professional steer and supervision from the new PVO. The proposed organisation chart with the creation of the PVO post in AFCD is at **Enclosure 2**.

17. The PVO will supervise the Animal Management (Operations) Division and Animal Management (Development) Division of the IQB to spearhead various service development/improvement initiatives in animal management/welfare issues. As a result of rising number of pet owners and increasing awareness and higher demands from members of the public, there is a significant expansion in the scope and level of responsibilities in animal management services provided by AFCD as illustrated in paragraphs 7 to 15 above. This trend is anticipated to continue. High level steer and directorate input are required on a full-time basis from the PVO to spearhead various service development/improvement initiatives.

18. The PVO will also supervise the Animal Health Division and the Veterinary Laboratory Division to provide high-level professional advice and leadership in the development and implementation of animal and public health measures to facilitate rapid detection and effective containment of emerging animal diseases. Primarily, by either regulating livestock farms and licensed animal exhibitions or conducting testing and surveillance (particularly for zoonotic diseases such as avian influenza), these Divisions are intimately involved in implementing programmes which impact both animal and public health. Considering the above-mentioned potential threat of zoonotic and new and emerging diseases, rapid detection of emerging animal diseases and effective containment is vital.

19. The proposed job description of the PVO post is at **Enclosure 3**.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CREATION OF A PVO RANK

20. In AFCD, the senior professional level is the highest rank for the four grades in the department, namely Agricultural Officer (AO), Fisheries Officer (FishO), Forestry Officer (ForO) and VO. At present, the ADAFC rank at D2 level is the promotion rank for officers at the senior professional level in these four grades. It is proposed that this arrangement should continue after the creation of the PVO rank and PVO post. In other words, the PVO and SVOs working in AFCD, FEHD and LCSD, as well as all the senior professional officers in the grades of AO, FishO and ForO would be eligible for and will compete on an equal basis for promotion to the ADAFC rank. Similar arrangements are also implemented in other departments.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

21. The ADAFC at D2 level is the only directorate officer in IQB. We have critically examined the current situation and considered it operationally undesirable and infeasible in the long run for the ADAFC of IQB, who is not necessarily trained with a veterinary background, to oversee the operational aspects of the seven divisions directly. We aim to maintain versatile directorate management on the one hand and strengthen the specialised professional directorate leadership on the other, particularly in those areas relating to animal disease control and animal management. It is not feasible to offload some of the existing duties of the IQB to other ADAFCs in AFCD as these

directorates officers are fully occupied with their existing workload and responsibilities. In view of the operational and functional needs, we are of the view that a new PVO rank pitched at D1 level and a PVO post should be created to underpin the ADAFC in the IQB in respect of the Animal Health Division, the Veterinary Laboratory Division, the Animal Management (Operations) Division and the Animal Management (Development) Division. The other three divisions namely the Plant and Pesticides Regulatory Division, the Import and Export Division and the Technical Services Division will remain under the direct supervision of the ADAFC of the IQB. There is no better alternative.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

22. The notional annual salary cost at mid-point required for the proposed creation of the PVO post is \$1,265,400. The full annual average staff cost, including salaries and staff on-cost, is \$1,609,080. AFCD will absorb the additional provision from their resources in 2011-12 and will include sufficient provision in the draft Estimates for the years after to meet the cost of the proposal.

STAFF CONSULTATION

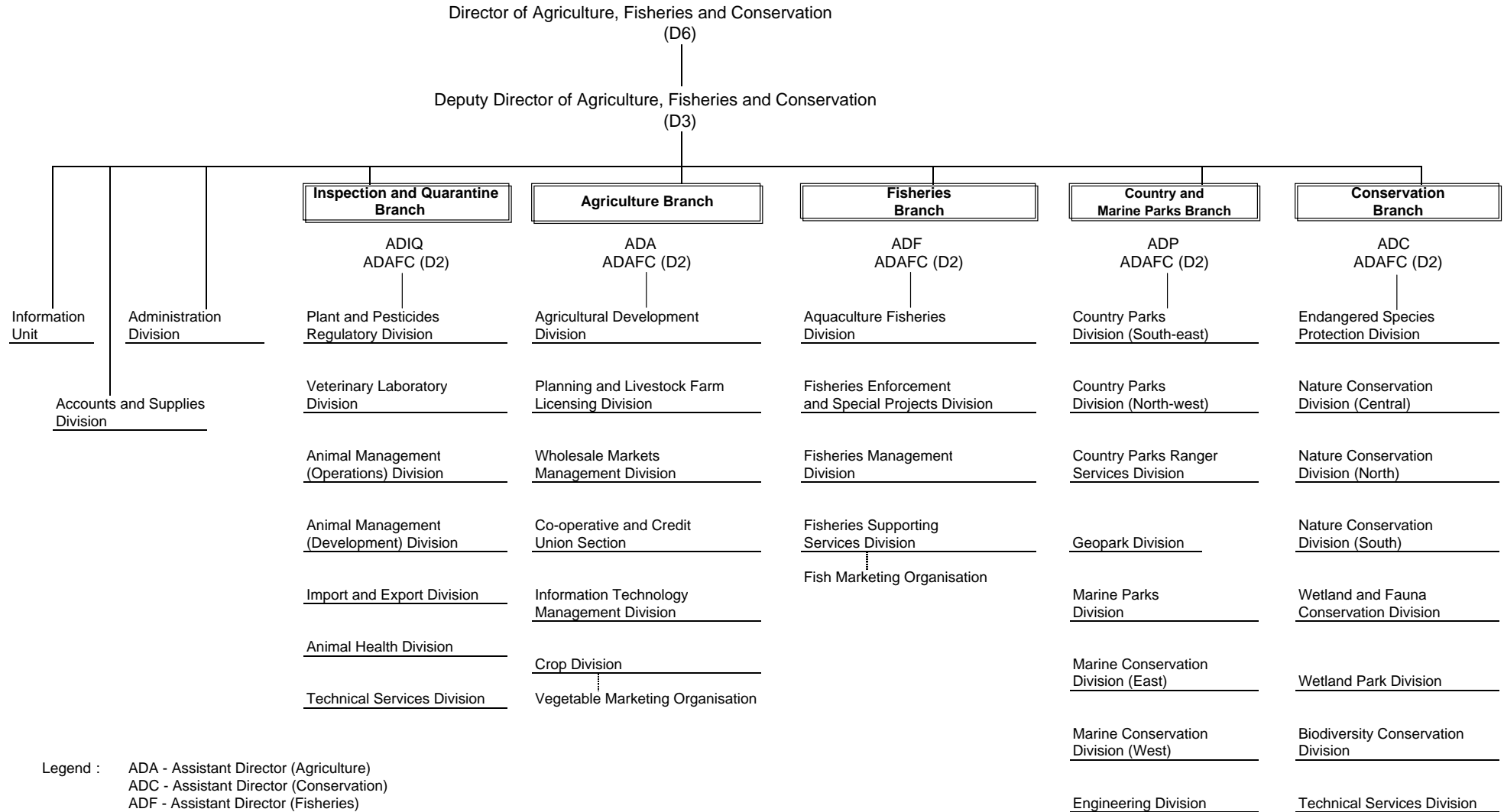
23. Members of the VO grade generally support the findings and recommendations of the GSR by the Standing Commission and AFCD's proposal to create the PVO rank and one PVO post with the proposed roles and responsibilities set out in Enclosure 3. The proposal has the support of the other three professional grades (i.e. the AO, FishO and ForO grades) in AFCD.

WAY FORWARD

24. Members are invited to comment on the proposal. Subject to Members' support, we will proceed to seek the approval of the Establishment Subcommittee and the Finance Committee.

**Food and Health Bureau
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
January 2011**

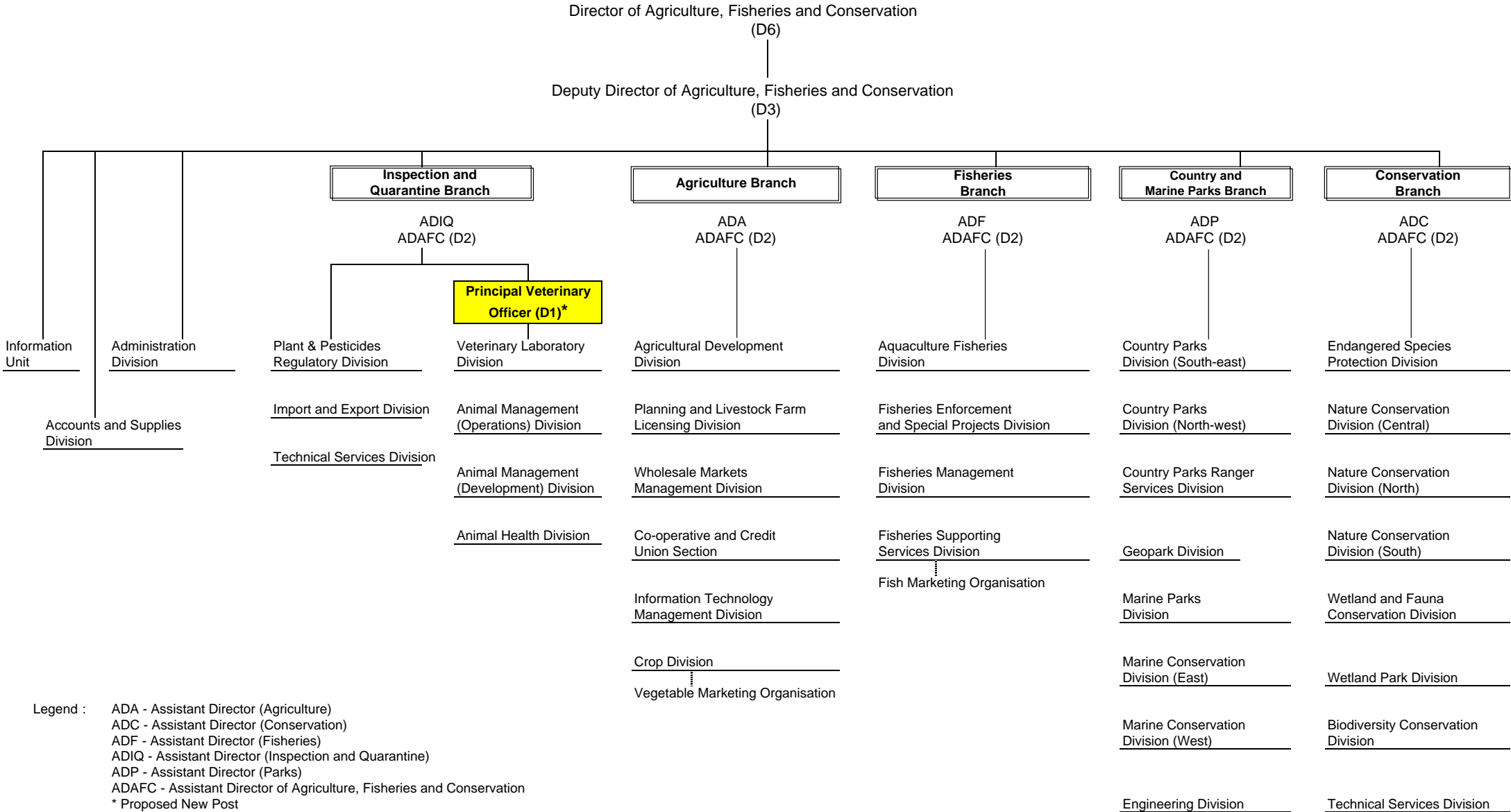
Existing Organisation Chart of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department



Legend :

- ADA - Assistant Director (Agriculture)
- ADC - Assistant Director (Conservation)
- ADF - Assistant Director (Fisheries)
- ADIQ - Assistant Director (Inspection and Quarantine)
- ADP - Assistant Director (Parks)
- ADAFC - Assistant Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

Proposed Organisation Chart of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department



**Proposed Job Description
Principal Veterinary Officer**

Rank : Principal Veterinary Officer (D1)

Responsible to : Assistant Director (Inspection and Quarantine)
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

Main Duties and Responsibilities –

1. To assist Assistant Director (Inspection and Quarantine) in the formulation and evaluation of animal disease control and animal management strategies and the development of operation systems to better anticipate and manage the emerging threats and challenges from animal diseases; and to take up the role of “veterinary epidemiologist/planning officer” for effectively minimising the impacts of any disease outbreaks and animal management crises.
2. To direct and supervise the work of the Animal Health Division, Veterinary Laboratory Division, Animal Management (Operations) Division and Animal Management (Development) Division under the Inspection and Quarantine Branch with a view to meeting service needs and ensuring compliance with relevant professional and service standards; and to steer and oversee the operation of these divisions to:
 - (a) review animal management related policies, ordinances and regulations;
 - (b) formulate legislative amendment proposals;
 - (c) review and develop operation procedures and guidelines for key processes of animal management activities to keep them attuned to present-day circumstances;
 - (d) review prosecution procedures and guidelines to ensure consistency and efficiency in handling of prosecution cases;
 - (e) plan, implement and evaluate education and publicity programmes on responsible pet ownership, animal welfare and other animal

- management issues;
 - (f) oversee the rabies control strategy;
 - (g) plan the monitoring and control of avian influenza;
 - (h) provide expert advice on other livestock disease control programmes;
 - (i) oversee the development and implementation of farm hygiene and biosecurity protocols;
 - (j) evaluate the monitoring of veterinary chemicals used in food animals;
 - (k) give recommendations for the registration of veterinary drugs and vaccines;
 - (l) develop strategies for diagnostic and surveillance testing for livestock and other animals and ensure their effective implementation; and
 - (m) ensure all laboratory testing protocols and procedures meet international standards.
3. To provide high-level professional input and technical support to facilitate formulation of governmental policy, review of legislations, implementation of contingency plans/measures on animal disease control, animal welfare and animal management matters; to explain government policies to the Executive Council, Legislative Council, District Councils and political parties etc. and to develop proactive and effective risk communication partnership with major stakeholders to address public concerns on related issues.
 4. To represent the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (or as part of the Mainland delegation) at meetings with relevant international bodies for protecting and promoting the interests of Hong Kong; and to maintain a close network with relevant Mainland and international authorities/organisations to handle public health issues requiring high-level veterinary involvement.
 5. To enhance the professional competencies and performance of the Veterinary Officer (VO) grade through the provision of professional input in management of the VO grade and various training and development initiatives.

6. To oversee the veterinary service development and professional regulatory issues in Hong Kong including the formulation and provision of public sector input in respect of veterinary education, registration and professional conduct of veterinarians; and to facilitate the works of the Veterinary Surgeons Board by representing the public veterinary services and providing the high-level and impartial professional advice that the Board requires.