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12 October 2005

Mrs. Constance LI,
LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene,
Legislative Council Building,
8 Jackson Road,
Central,
Hong Kong.
(Fax no. 25090775)

Dear Mrs. LI,

At the meeting of LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 7 April 2005, the members and representatives from local live poultry industry asked the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) to furnish expert assessment for the Administration's assertion that "if there is a local H5N1 avian influenza outbreak which entails the culling of all live poultry in the territory, there is a strong reason to suggest that either the vaccine currently used in live chickens has ceased to be effective or that the virus has undergone mutation". Set out below is AFCD's expert assessment for information of the members and the trade representatives:

- The vaccine currently in use in local chicken farms is an inactivated H5N2 vaccine. It would appear that the vaccine currently provides sufficient protection against the circulating viruses found in this region.

- However, if there is a widespread outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in local farms or markets in Hong Kong

with associated significant mortality, then there are a number of likely reasons why this might arise.

- Firstly, the vaccine will only provide protection against H5 subtypes of avian influenza. Since there is no haemagglutinin cross-protection, it would mean that our chickens would not be able to protect against infection by another subtype, e.g. H7.

- Secondly, if the H5 virus introduced to Hong Kong is sufficiently different antigenically, it is possible that our current vaccine might prove less effective in preventing spread. Whilst studies have shown that inactivated vaccines do provide a broad range of protection even for haemagglutinin heterogenicity approaching 10%, we cannot rule out this possibility

- Whether the different antigenicity may be due to mutation (antigenic drift or shift) or due to re-assortment is not possible to predict.

- For these reasons, the Administration has a very intensive surveillance programme for HPAI in Hong Kong. All viruses isolated are sequenced to enable us to keep track of virus changes and to select the best vaccine available.

(Dr. Eric HF Tai)
for Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

cc
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
(Mr. Wallace KK LAU, Fax: 24800467)