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The Panel Members,
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene,
Legislative Council,
Legislative Council Building,
8 Jackson Road,
Central, Hong Kong.

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10 July 2006

Dear Honorary members,

Criteria for closing/re-opening Mai Po Nature Reserve (MPNR)

WWF shares our Government's concern about the potential human, economic and social costs of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 virus on the people of Hong Kong if an outbreak was to occur here.

As a result, WWF have taken a number of steps to minimise the health risk to visitors to the Mai Po Nature Reserve (MPNR) which we manage on behalf of the Hong Kong SAR Government. WWF has also been cooperating with the Department of Microbiology, Hong Kong University in conducting an on-going HPAI surveillance programme on the wild birds within MPNR.

WWF has tried to work closely with the Hong Kong SAR Government to ensure that rational measures are taken to prevent any outbreak and spread of HPAI in Hong Kong. WWF readily agreed at a substantial cost to ourselves, to the temporary closure of MPNR in 2004 and 2006 despite the absence of any guidelines on the criteria for re-opening. Since November 2005, we have tried unsuccessfully to arrange meetings with the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) and the Environment, Transport and Works Bureau (ETWB) to discuss developing criteria for the closure/re-opening of MPNR. These attempts can be summarized in the table below.

Date of letter	Recipient	Topic	Response
10 November 2005	Secretary of the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau	Provide suggestions on criteria and steps that could be taken for the closure of MPNR when cases of H5N1 are found in Hong Kong	Acknowledgement received on 3 December 2005. No formal reply has been received.
24 February 2006	Secretary of the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau	Request for meeting to discuss the closure of Mai Po Nature Reserve	Reply dated 18 March 2006. Response was that the HWFB was "...closely monitoring the situation of avian influenza and will discuss with your organisation on the arrangement for re-opening the MPNR as soon as possible." No discussions have been held.
29 March 2006	Secretary Environment, Transport and Works	Request for meeting to discuss the closure and reopening of MPNR	Reply dated 31 March 2006. Secretary ETWB was unavailable for the meeting

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	Bureau		but said that "...the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food has been actively considering the issue and his Bureau would separately reply to your letter to set out their views and the proposed way forward." No reply received from HWFB.
10 April 2006	Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Food and Environmental Hygiene)	Request for meeting to discuss the criteria for the reopening of the Reserve, the steps the Reserve would need to take to minimise the risk of any possible infection from the bird flu virus, and the criteria under which Mai Po may need to be closed in future	None received

As a result, WWF was disappointed when during the meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene held on 11 April 2006, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) said that;

"AFCD was discussing with the management of the Reserve the reopening of the Reserve for birdwatchers and the development of criteria for temporary closure and re-opening of the Reserve."

This is quoted in Paragraph 60 of the minutes of the meeting and is not correct. WWF has not been approached by AFCD on this issue.

We now understand that Agenda Item V of the July 11th 2006 meeting of the Panel on Food Safety & Environmental Hygiene concerns "Criteria for closing/re-opening Mai Po Nature Reserve if HPAI-infected wild bird(s) is detected within this area and in its close proximity". Please note that the administration has not discussed this issue with WWF and we did not know about the full details of the proposed criteria until they appeared on the website of the agenda for the Panel meeting.

WWF are charged with the responsibility to manage MPNR by our Government but for some reason, we have been left out of the discussion on this vitally important issue of the criteria for the closure/re-opening of the Reserve when there are cases of dead wild birds with the HPAI H5N1 virus found within or close to the Reserve.

Reading through the draft criteria proposed by the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB), we have a number of questions including:

- The fact that in producing the draft criteria, the HWFB consulted the results of the United National Environment Programme's meeting in Kenya in April 2006 on "Scientific Seminar on Avian Influenza, the Environment and Migratory Birds"? Amongst the conclusion was the request that governments "avoid prescribing closure of wetland protected area except where absolutely necessitated by a continuing H5N1 outbreak. Whole scale reserve closure serves very limited disease control and is highly detrimental to conservation".



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[\[http://www.cms.int/avianflu/conclusions_rec_ai_seminar.pdf\]](http://www.cms.int/avianflu/conclusions_rec_ai_seminar.pdf)

- Why the temporary closure of MPNR should be dependent on the detection of H5 viruses, rather than the H5N1 virus specifically, in dead wild birds within 3 km of the Reserve. This is especially when all the recent cases of human infection with the HPAI virus has been due to infection with the H5N1 virus.
- Why the draft set of criteria should single out MPNR, the Wetland Park and walk-in aviaries in Hong Kong when there are many other areas where wild birds congregate, such as Tsim Bei Tsui and other parts of the Ramsar Site.
- Why does the government not establish a working group with ornithologists and medical specialists, to provide information and other assistance in minimising the risk of the outbreak and spread of HPAI from wild birds? Other administrations, such as the Scottish Executive, have done so [<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/02/03103441/6>]. Similarly, the government could set up a working group with representatives from the poultry industry when there is an outbreak of HPAI amongst poultry in Hong Kong.

In summary, our main points are that the government should:

- Consult with WWF as Manager of the MPNR as well as other relevant experts such as from Hong Kong University etc. in the process of developing criteria for the closure/re-opening of MPNR when cases of HPAI are found in Hong Kong;
- Establish an expert ornithological group in providing professional advice when cases of HPAI are found amongst wild birds in Hong Kong;
- Have a rational policy towards the closure of the countryside (not solely MPNR) when cases of HPAI amongst wild birds are found in Hong Kong.

Please be assured that WWF considers it a privilege to manage Mai Po Nature Reserve and is primarily motivated by environmental concerns and the public's well being. We are seeking an equal partnership with our government on this important issue because we can bring together a wide range of expertise to assist our Government. We find it difficult to comprehend why our offers to help are continually ignored. Thank you very much for your help and we look forward to hearing your comments on these points.

Yours sincerely,

Lew Young (Manager)
Mai Po Nature Reserve