

**For discussion
on 10 March 2009**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Preventive Measures against Avian Influenza

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the latest development concerning the discovery of bird and poultry carcasses along the western coastline of Hong Kong, as well as the preventive measures adopted by the Administration against avian influenza.

Discovery of wild bird and poultry carcasses

2. To enable early detection of avian influenza virus and prevention of avian influenza outbreaks, the Government has implemented a comprehensive surveillance programme for both local poultry and imported poultry since 1998. Since the end of 2002, the surveillance programme has been extended to cover wild birds, captive wild birds in recreational parks and pet birds in the market. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has also offered sick and dead wild bird collection service to the public starting from October 2005. As at mid-February 2009, a total of over 33 000 dead wild birds were collected for avian influenza testing and 47 wild birds were confirmed to contain H5N1 avian influenza virus.

3. On 29 January 2009, the carcasses of a goose and a duck were found at a beach near Sha Lo Wan of Lantau Island. Since then and up till the end of February, a total of 37 wild bird and poultry carcasses were found along the western coastline of Hong Kong at locations including Sha Lo Wan, Sham Wat Wan and San Shek Wan of Lantau Island, and also Butterfly Beach and Lung Kwu Tan Beach of Tuen Mun. Amongst these 37 carcasses, there were 19 chickens, five ducks, two geese and five wild birds. The species of the remaining six carcasses could not be identified as they were already badly decomposed when found.

4. All these bird and poultry carcasses were tested for avian influenza virus. Nine of the poultry carcasses were found to be positive of H5N1 avian influenza virus whereas the remaining 28 carcasses were tested negative of the virus. Our genetic analysis of the virus shows that the virus has no significant mutation for the time being and there is no sign of human-to-human transmission

5. The Administration is very concerned about the incident and has immediately adopted a number of follow-up measures –

- (a) The AFCD has stepped up inspections against illegal keeping of backyard poultry throughout the territory. This special operation was completed on 13 February and covered over 1 000 villages. The AFCD did not observe any unauthorised keeping of poultry in Lantau Island.
- (b) The AFCD and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) have also stepped up inspection and monitoring at local farms, wholesale market and retail outlets. Live poultry traders were reminded to remain vigilant against the risks of avian influenza and maintain good hygiene.
- (c) The AFCD has also reminded pet bird shop owners, licence holders of pet poultry and racing pigeons to strengthen precautionary and biosecurity measures against avian influenza.
- (d) The FEHD has stepped up monitoring at the import level. Cloacal swabs are taken from every consignment of live poultry for testing against H5 antigen.
- (e) The FEHD staff have also inspected some farms in Guangdong that supplies live or chilled chicken to Hong Kong. No abnormal deaths of poultry or signs of recent avian influenza outbreak were detected. We also maintained close contacts with the Mainland authorities and exchanged information in a timely manner on the incident.
- (f) The AFCD has uploaded the detailed information concerning the discovery of dead bird and poultry carcasses to its website since 7 February 2009, so that the public are aware of the latest information. The website also contains health advice for the public and the trade concerning the prevention of avian influenza.

Surveillance programme for poultry

6. Apart from carrying out the wild bird surveillance programme, the Administration has implemented a comprehensive surveillance programme for poultry at all levels of trade.

7. At the farm level, the AFCD staff inspect local poultry farms on a regular basis. The farms are required to vaccinate their chickens and implement stringent biosecurity measures. Blood and faecal samples of live poultry on farms are collected regularly for avian influenza testing. Besides, every batch of local chickens is also tested for avian influenza within five days of marketing, and only chickens with negative results are allowed to be sold for human consumption. Over 42 000 blood samples and 20 800 faecal samples were collected for testing in 2008.

8. We have also imposed stringent requirement on the importation of live poultry. 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. At the point of importation, the live poultry are subject to serological monitoring of vaccine effectiveness as well as virological testing for H5 antigen. More than 10 000 swabs have been taken for virological tests since 2008 and all were found negative of the H5 antigen.

9. As for the wholesale and retail level, stringent hygiene requirements are imposed. Constant inspection and monitoring are carried out to ensure that the hygiene requirements are complied with. Furthermore, any dead chicken found will be tested for avian influenza virus. Faecal samples of live poultry at wholesale and retail markets alike are taken every month for testing of avian influenza. Since 2008, over 300 and 8 400 samples were taken from the poultry wholesale market and retail outlets respectively.

New measures implemented in 2008

10. In the light of the avian influenza incidents in 2008, the Administration has adopted new measures to enhance our ability to arrest any possible future spread of the avian influenza virus in Hong Kong.

11. Detection of H5N1 avian influenza virus in environmental swabs taken from local retail markets in June 2008 prompted the Government to prohibit overnight stocking of live poultry at retail outlets with effect from 2 July 2008. Other preventive measures at the retail end were also enhanced. These include requiring the retailers to thoroughly cleanse and disinfect the retail premises including slaughter equipment and chicken cages every night. These measures are effective means to break the virus cycle and reduce the virus load in the environment. Since the implementation of the new measures, the operation at the retail stalls has been fairly smooth and the retailers have by now accustomed to the new operation mode.

12. In response to the requests of many retailers who wanted the Government to buy out their business, we launched the live poultry trade buyout scheme in July 2008. Under the buyout scheme, ex-gratia payments were offered to farmers, wholesalers, transporters and retailers who chose to cease their business permanently and one-off grants were provided to their workers. The application deadline was 24 September 2008 and the numbers of valid applications received from farmers, wholesalers, transporters, retailers and workers are 22, 49, 115, 329 and 1 125 respectively. The buyout scheme has helped us move closer to our policy objective of separating live poultry from humans by substantially reducing the number of live poultry traders, in particular live poultry retailers, where over 70% of them have joined the scheme and left the trade permanently.

13. On 9 December 2008, a local chicken farm located at Ha Tsuen, Yuen Long (the index farm) was declared as an infected place after dead chickens found in the farm were tested positive of avian influenza. A series of response actions were taken immediately to prevent the spread of virus including the culling operations in the index farm and another farm located within three-kilometre radius of the index farm and in Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Poultry Wholesale Market, suspension of local and imported live poultry including day-old chicks and pet birds supply for 21 days, thorough cleansing and disinfection in retail markets, etc. To better understand the cause of the incident and prepare ourselves against the risks of any possible avian influenza in future, the Administration set up two investigation groups responsible for conducting epidemiological study of the avian flu outbreak on the index farm and the vaccine study respectively. The Investigation Group on Epidemiological Study would examine the biosecurity measures of the index farm, try to identify the source of infection, review the existing biosecurity measures of farms and propose enhancement measures so as to assist the farmers to combat avian influenza. The Investigation Group on Vaccine Study would be

responsible for conducting research and tests on the efficacy of the existing H5N2 vaccine used in Hong Kong as well as study the effectiveness and quality of alternative vaccines. The Investigation Group on Epidemiological Study will release its report shortly while the Group on Vaccine Study will complete its report as early as possible by end 2009.

Central poultry slaughtering facility

14. Implementation of central slaughtering remains the ultimate goal in Government's policy of segregating live poultry from humans. The Administration is pressing ahead with the preparation works on this front, including conducting the environmental impact assessment and land rezoning process. As time is needed to go through these statutory procedures, we expect that the central slaughtering facility would come into operation in 2011/12.

15. To enable the setting up of a legislative framework for the regulation and control of the central slaughter of live poultry, there is a need to amend the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap 132) and other related subsidiary legislation. The plan was to introduce the proposed Amendment Bill to the Legislative Council (LegCo) within the 2008-09 legislative session. However, given the shrinkage of the live poultry trade after the Buyout Scheme offered to the trade in the third quarter of 2008 resulting in significant changes in the scale and mode of operation of the central slaughtering facility, the draft legislative amendments have to be reviewed and revised. We now plan to introduce the Amendment Bill to the LegCo in the first half of 2009-10 legislative session. The revised legislative programme will not affect the overall development programme of the facility as other preparatory work such as the environmental impact assessment, land rezoning process, etc. are being conducted in parallel as scheduled, and the facility is expected to come into operation in 2011/12.

Way forward

16. The occurrence of avian influenza cases in the Mainland and the Asian region (such as Vietnam and Cambodia) in the past few months indicated that the threat of avian influenza still persists. The Government will remain vigilant against the risks of avian influenza and continue to work with academia, trade and general public in its efforts to better protect public health.

Food and Health Bureau
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