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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 10 March 2009**

Measures to control avian influenza

Purpose

This paper provides an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (the Panel) on the detection of H5N1 virus in a local chicken farm in December 2008 and the finding of bird carcasses in the New Territories in January/February 2009.

Detection of the H5N1 virus in a local chicken farm

2. On 8 December 2008, a local chicken farmer of a farm 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. On 18 December 2008, the Administration briefed the Panel on the actions taken to prevent the possible spread of the virus as follows -

Culling of poultry

- (a) All live poultry (around 68 000 chickens) in the index farm were culled and destroyed. In accordance with guidelines of the World Organisation for Animal Health and Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, all live poultry within three-kilometre radius of the index farms (around 18 000 chickens) were also culled and destroyed.

- (b) 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 also culled and destroyed.

Suspension of local and imported live poultry supply

- (c) 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 2008.

Testing of live poultry in other local farms

- (d) During the suspension period of local chicken supply, inspection and intensive testing of live poultry in all remaining local farms would be conducted.

Stepping up surveillance on live poultry and birds

- (e) Surveillance and sample testing on birds in the Yuen Po Street Bird Garden had 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 2008.

Disinfection of wholesale market and retail outlets

- (f) All live poultry retail outlets were inspected on 9 December 2008 to ensure that live poultry were slaughtered by 8 pm that day in compliance with the law.
- (g) The wholesale market and all live poultry retail outlets were thoroughly cleansed and disinfected.

Distribution of Tamiflu and enhanced surveillance of human infection

- (h) 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) had 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 seven days.

- (i) Hospitals and private medical practitioners were reminded to report any suspected cases to the CHP. The CHP had also set up a hotline manned by healthcare staff to answer enquiries from the public.

Setting up of Investigation Groups

- (j) Two investigation groups consisting of representatives from various departments and external professionals had been set up. The Investigation Group on Epidemiological Study would do an in-depth examination of the biosecurity measures of the index farm and try to identify the source of infection and the channel that the virus could have got into the farm. On the other hand, 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 and would also study the effectiveness and quality of alternative vaccines to see if they were suitable for use in Hong Kong.

4. Hon WONG Kwok-hing urged the Administration to step up enforcement against the smuggling of eggs with other foodstuffs into Hong Kong to better safeguard public health. There were concerns about the recent avian influenza outbreak in the index farm having been caused by smuggled fertilised eggs from the Mainland containing infected chicken embryos.

5. The Administration advised that the Investigation Group on Epidemiological Study would look into the cause of infection in the index farm from all perspectives. The Investigation Group would try to complete its preliminary investigation in two to three weeks time and submit a full report in two months. The Administration further advised that AFCD had in place a monitoring system to control importation of fertilised eggs by local licensed farms. Specifically, licensed chicken farmers were required to keep an accurate and up-to-date record of the numbers of breeders of different age, day old chicks and fertilised eggs. AFCD staff inspected the farms on a regular basis, and these records must be made available to AFCD staff at any time on request. Moreover, Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), the Marine Police, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), AFCD and Food and Health Bureau (FHB) had set up a task force last year to step up enforcement against smuggling of foodstuffs into Hong Kong. In recent months, the departments concerned had conducted more inspections on travellers who were suspected of

bringing in eggs and live poultry when crossing the border. Following the recent avian influenza outbreak in a local farm, C&ED and the Marine Police had increased the number of random check for suspected vehicles and vessels at land boundary crossings and on Hong Kong waters.

6. Hon Tommy CHEUNG and Hon WONG Yung-kan questioned the effectiveness of using sentinel chickens (i.e. unvaccinated chickens) as a means to detect whether a chicken farm was infected with avian influenza virus, having regard to the fact that both vaccinated chickens and sentinel chickens in the index farm died from being infected with H5N1 virus.

7. The Administration pointed out that although both vaccinated chickens and sentinel chickens in the index farm died from being infected with H5N1 virus, the fact that the majority of the about 200 chickens found dead/dying were sentinel chickens had enabled AFCD to take prompt action to cull and destroy all live poultry in the index farm and another farm within three-kilometre radius of the index farm to prevent the possible spread of the virus. Moreover, if no sentinel chickens were placed among poultry in a farm, the chicken farmer might not be alerted in the first instance when the chickens were infected with avian influenza virus, as vaccinated chickens could still be infected and alive but shed virus and the symptoms they displayed were generally not obvious during the onset of the disease.

8. Hon Tommy CHEUNG was of the view that the fact that the vaccinated chickens in the index farm were found positive of the avian flu virus demonstrated that it was necessary for Hong Kong to develop its own vaccine to suit Hong Kong's circumstances, instead of relying on vaccines developed overseas.

9. The Administration responded that apart from allocating resources to AFCD to conduct research on the efficacy of vaccines against avian influenza, the Administration had all along been providing funding through the University Grants Committee for conducting the same.

10. Hon WONG Yung-kan hoped that the two Investigation Groups would meet with the live poultry trade before drawing their conclusions, as their recommendations would have significant bearing on the trade.

11. The Administration responded that it was up to members of the two Investigation Groups to decide whether they wished to meet with the trade. The Administration, however, assured members that the views/concerns of the trade would be fully considered. FHB, FEHD and AFCD had been maintaining close liaison with the trade and had met with the traders on 17 December 2008 to discuss measures to prevent the possible spread of the virus.

Finding of bird carcasses in the New Territories

12. From 29 January 2009 up to 11 am on 10 February 2009, 33 poultry carcasses were found along the western waterfront of the New Territories. Nine of the 33 carcasses were confirmed to be H5N1 positive; two were suspected of the H5 virus and further confirmatory tests were being conducted; tests to the remaining carcasses were still going on.

13. At the meeting on 10 February 2009, the Panel was briefed by the Administration on the actions taken with regard to the recent finding of bird carcasses in the New Territories. Members noted the following actions taken by the Administration to identify the possible cause of the discovery of bird carcasses in the New Territories -

- (a) inspections had been made to the waterfront and its vicinity in the first instance by AFCD. As the locations concerned could only be accessed by mountainous roads and were sparsely populated, the possibility of people dumping carcasses at these locations and carrying out smuggling activities were not high;
- (b) inspections had also been made to all of the villages in the New Territories and the outlying islands to ascertain whether there was any unauthorised keeping of poultry. Hitherto, AFCD had completed inspections to all villages located along the coastal areas and no unauthorised keeping of poultry had been observed. However, several households in villages located in the inland of the New Territories had been found to keep poultry illegally. Prosecution action would be initiated against the law breakers. As the households detected for unauthorised keeping of poultry were located very far away from the coastal areas, the possibility of such illegal acts having any direct bearing on the recent discovery of bird carcasses was not high; and
- (c) views had been sought from experts on whether prevailing water current and the weather were factors related to the discovery of bird carcasses. According to the assessment of the experts, water flowing from Zhujiang Kou and the western shoreline of Shenzhen passed through the Lingdingyang before reaching the western shoreline of the New Territories.

14. Members further noted that to reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreak, inspections to retail outlets, the wholesale market and local farms had been stepped up; advisory letters had been sent to remind farmers to be vigilant on their farm biosecurity measures; poultry stall operators had been reminded to maintain good hygiene; more frequent thorough cleansing at retail markets and the wholesale market was conducted; and efforts on combating smuggling activities involving live poultry and live animals had been stepped up. Furthermore, FEHD staff had been dispatched on 9 February 2009 to inspect the

registered Mainland farms which supplied chickens to Hong Kong. Representatives from the Administration had also met with the authorities concerned in Beijing to exchange views on the recent discovery of bird carcasses in Hong Kong.

15. Hon WONG Yung-kan was of the view that to better guard against avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong, regular testing for the H5 virus should be conducted to wild birds and migratory birds which were natural hosts of influenza virus.

16. The Administration responded that collecting faecal samples of live wild birds and migratory birds as well as the dead bodies of live birds and migratory birds in the Mai Po Nature Reserve and other places for the H5 virus was an ongoing process conducted by AFCD. For instance, from 29 January 2009 up to 11 am on 10 February 2009, AFCD had collected one dead grey heron in the Mai Po Nature Reserve, one dead peregrine falcon in Yau Kam Tau and one dead large-billed crow in Chun Kwan Road Ancient Kiln Park, all of which were tested positive for the H5N1 virus.

17. In response to Dr Hon Joseph LEE's enquiry as to whether the recent discovery of bird carcasses was a seasonal phenomenon, the Administration advised that there were past incidents of finding of poultry carcasses along the shoreline of Hong Kong, but the scale had never been so extensive as the recent incident. The Administration would continue to closely monitor the situation.

Relevant papers

18. Members are invited to access the Legislative Council website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the relevant papers and minutes of the meetings.