

**Motion on
“Reviewing the existing policy on live poultry in Hong Kong”
at the Legislative Council meeting on 12 May 2010**

Progress Report

Purpose

At the Legislative Council meeting on 12 May 2010, the motion “Reviewing the existing policy on live poultry in Hong Kong” as moved by Hon Vincent FANG Gang as amended by Hon WONG Kwok-hing and Hon WONG Yung-kan was carried. The motion as amended is at **Annex**. This paper aims to report on the follow-up work undertaken by the Administration on Members’ proposals.

Shelving the Development of a Poultry Slaughtering Centre at this Stage

2. The Government announced on 1 June 2010 that it would shelve the development of a poultry slaughtering centre (PSC) at this stage, the main reason being that the latest scientific assessment has confirmed that the risk of avian influenza (AI) in Hong Kong at present is considered very low. This is the outcome of the biosecurity measures and preventive and control measures against AI implemented at the poultry farm, wholesale, retail and import levels over the years.

3. Earlier on, the Government conducted a scientific assessment to evaluate the risk of human infection by AI viruses associated with the live poultry trade in Hong Kong, and consulted the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases on the results of the assessment. The Committee is chaired by Professor YUEN Kwok-yung and comprises doctors, veterinarians, microbiologists and other experts.

4. The Scientific Committee agreed that the risk of AI to Hong Kong has been significantly reduced in recent years and confirmed the efficacy of the control and surveillance measures at all levels. However, as the situation would keep changing, the Scientific Committee suggested that we need to maintain vigilance against AI and that the existing measures should be maintained and reinforced.

5. Scientific statistics also illustrate that the risk of human infection by AI has been reduced to a minimal level. On-going surveillance conducted in retail outlets by the University of Hong Kong has found that the isolation rate of H9N2 viruses, which is a good indicator of the loading of AI virus in the poultry population, has significantly dropped from 5.11% before the ban on the keeping of live poultry overnight in retail markets and the introduction of the buyout scheme for the live poultry trade in 2008 to 0.09% recently. This shows that the risk of AI at the retail level has been successfully controlled at a stable and low level.

6. At the same time, we note that in recent years, consumers have demonstrated a preference for frozen and chilled chickens, the percentage of which increased from 79% in 2004 to 94% in 2009. This trend is likely to continue. We have also conducted a commercial viability study which concluded that it is not commercially viable to run a PSC in Hong Kong.

7. Combining various relevant factors, we consider that on the premises that the risk of AI is well controlled and public health is fully safeguarded, the existing situation of live chicken supply may be maintained.

Maintaining the Operational Landscape of the Live Poultry Trade

8. To reduce the likelihood of human contact with live poultry, the Government introduced a voluntary surrender scheme and a buyout scheme for poultry retailers, wholesalers, transporters and farmers in 2004/05 and 2008 respectively. As a result, the number of retail outlets was reduced from over 800 prior to the introduction of the first voluntary surrender scheme to 133 at present, wholesalers down from 87 to 23, and poultry farms from 192 to 30. The total licensed rearing capacity of poultry farms in Hong Kong has also been reduced from 3.9 million in 2004 to about 1.3 million at present. The supply of live chickens in Hong Kong, including those imported from the Mainland, declined from a daily average of 92 000 chickens in 2003 to only 16 500 in 2009. The reduction in these numbers has greatly contributed to containing the chicken population and chicken supply in Hong Kong at a steady level, thus minimising the chance of human contact with live chickens.

9. To continue keeping the risk of AI under control, the policy on banning the overnight stocking of live poultry at the retail level implemented since 2008 will remain unchanged. We will also keep the number of live poultry retail outlets, the number and rearing capacity of local chicken farms and the daily quantity of imported chickens unchanged.

10. If, in future, the number of live poultry retail outlets is reduced due to various reasons, the Government will, in light of factors such as the AI risk prevalent at the time and the overall live chicken supply and demand, review and assess the need for re-issue of licences or offering live chicken stalls in markets for open auction when appropriate.

11. As for the request to increase the number of imported live chickens from the Mainland on the eve of traditional Chinese festivals, the Government is inclined to maintain a cautious approach. We have taken this measure on several occasions on the eve of traditional festivals between 2004 and 2008. However, in June 2008, the Government decided to increase the number of imported live chickens from the Mainland a few days before the Tuen Ng Festival, from 20 000 per day to 50 000 per day. Consequently, in the days leading to and after the Tuen Ng Festival, AI viruses were found in four wet markets. Against this background, the Government has great reservation about the suggestion to increase the supply of imported live chickens on the eve of traditional festivals. Furthermore, during the traditional festivals from 2009 till now, although the number of imported live chickens from the Mainland was not increased, the overall supply has remained generally sufficient. At the same time, there has been an adequate supply of chilled and frozen chickens. In addition, people are gradually changing their eating habits. We therefore consider it not appropriate to increase the number of imported live chickens on the eve of traditional Chinese festivals, in order to avoid a drastic worsening of the overstocking situation at the wholesale level and consequent increase of the AI risk.

Enhanced Measures on AI Prevention

12. To further keep up with the momentum of our surveillance programme under the status quo option, we would implement a basket of enhanced surveillance and control measures at all levels of the live poultry supply chain –

Level	Enhanced Measures on AI Prevention
Farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strict enforcement of biosecurity measures introduced since 2008
Wholesale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the sampling size for H5 antibody titre testing in wholesale market for enhancing the precision of flock immunity estimates
Retail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the number of environmental samples taken by the University of Hong Kong at markets (samples per year to increase by 5% from the current some 3 400 to 3 570) • Enhancing surprise inspections to ensure strict compliance with hygiene measures (increasing inspection frequency from bi-weekly to weekly)
Import Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to conduct testing for H5 antigen and antibody titre level for every imported consignment • Increasing the testing of blood samples (by 10% from 18 to 20)

Hygiene Work and Ventilation of Public Markets

13. As for the hygiene and ventilation system in public markets, currently there are a total of 86 poultry stalls selling live poultry in 39 public markets under the management of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). Since July 2008, the Government has introduced the ban on overnight stocking of live poultry at retail outlets, requiring that all live poultry at market stalls must be slaughtered before 8pm daily and that no live poultry is allowed to be kept on these premises from 8pm to 5am the next day. To further safeguard public health, poultry stallholders are required to conduct a thorough clean-up of their stalls and equipment at the close of business every day. Cleansing contractors engaged by FEHD would use high pressure hot water jet cleaner with disinfectant to clean all parts of the poultry stalls, including walls, floors, poultry cages, and individual scalding room every night. Besides, except during the process of loading and unloading or on other grounds that are reasonable and accepted by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene, all live poultry are not allowed to be kept in places beyond the confines of the poultry stalls.

14. Individual ventilation system has been installed in 19 poultry stalls in 9 markets, while 21 poultry stalls in 10 air-conditioned markets are fitted with individual air-conditioning facilities, where emissions from the poultry stalls are separated from the central ventilation system of the markets. For other poultry stalls, installation of individual air-conditioning facilities is not possible mainly due to the relatively small space of the stalls. The Government will continue to monitor the overall hygiene conditions of the poultry stalls in markets.

Conclusion

15. Prevention and control of AI requires the on-going and concerted efforts of the community as a whole. The work of the Government will not slacken off as a result of the shelving of the development of PSC at this stage. On the contrary, we will strive harder to enhance the preventive measures. We will thoroughly reassess the risk of AI and the effectiveness of various preventive and control measures from time to time and closely monitor the possible mutations of AI viruses with a view to ensuring that our policies are serving their purposes. The Government will reconsider adjusting the prevention and control policy if the situation is reversed.

Food and Health Bureau
July 2010

**Motion on
“Reviewing the existing policy on live poultry in Hong Kong”
moved by Hon Vincent FANG Kang
at the Legislative Council meeting
of Wednesday, 12 May 2010**

**Motion as amended by Hon WONG Kwok-hing and Hon WONG
Yung-kan**

That, given that Hong Kong has been effective in preventing avian influenza and the remark made publicly by the Secretary for Food and Health that the risks of avian influenza outbreaks have been significantly reduced, coupled with the fact that there has not been a case of indigenous human avian influenza in Hong Kong since 1997 and there was no case of avian influenza outbreak in local farms and Mainland farms which supply chickens to Hong Kong in the past one and a half years; on the other hand, there is still a strong demand for live chickens among Hong Kong people and that quite a number of people express the wish to buy live chickens at affordable prices through more convenient channels, especially during major traditional Chinese festivals; in this connection, this Council urges the Government:

- (a) to review the existing policy on live poultry supply so as to reduce market intervention by administrative means and to appropriately increase the supply of live poultry according to market demand under safe and reasonable conditions, with a view to alleviating the pressure of price increases in live poultry and satisfying people’s needs for live poultry as far as possible;
- (b) to faithfully implement the usual practice of the Food and Health Bureau to maintain the quantity of daily market supply of live poultry from the Mainland and local farms at similar levels;
- (c) to continuously maintain the usual practice for the live poultry trade in the past by appropriately increasing the supply of live poultry from the Mainland to Hong Kong according to market demand during major traditional Chinese festivals under safe circumstances, so as to meet people’s special needs in those festivals;

- (d) to re-assess the need to develop a live poultry slaughtering centre in Hong Kong with regard to economic benefits and risk levels; and
- (e) to seriously consolidate the successful and valuable operational experience of the local live poultry trade in being able to continue to raise, distribute, retail transport and slaughter live poultry, etc., when facing unprecedented difficulties, and on the basis of such foundation and experience, to promote the development of a new form of local live poultry trade to bring about an increase in the local supply of live poultry while creating more new opportunities for setting up businesses and employment;
- (f) to appropriately raise the ceiling on the quantity of live poultry raised in local farms; and
- (g) to strengthen the monitoring of avian influenza on a farm-to-retail basis, and to allocate additional resources to improve the hygiene of wholesale markets and public markets and to expeditiously improve the ventilating systems and install additional air-conditioning facilities in public markets, etc., so as to comprehensively raise the standard of hygiene in selling live poultry, thereby enabling people to continue to consume safely live poultry.