



**Panel of Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene 16<sup>th</sup> April 2013 - Avian influenza oral submission speaking notes.**

The SPCA recognizes that Hong Kong has a fairly robust risk management programme aimed at preventing HPAI related human & veterinary health events.

Vaccination programmes help to protect poultry (and backyard poultry are banned) and a range of biosecurity measures are often in place where birds are traded or exhibited dependant on risk assessment. Risk assessment is ongoing and includes surveillance programmes targeting poultry, pet trade birds and wild birds allowing the flexibility to introduce additional risk management measures if needed.

However such measures as increased bio-security, vaccination programmes and surveillance can only reduce the risks of a veterinary public health event and with the current HK systems a key risk factor continues to be increased (often unnecessary) close contact between humans and birds.

Within the **poultry industry**, wet markets & stalls selling live poultry directly to the public are particularly problematic in terms of potential disease events. Also the continued importation of poultry from outside of HK adds additional risks that are inherent with distant sources and longer supply chains.

Subsequently the risk of an AI related public health event and its probable negative impact on the local poultry industry and the risk to other birds in Hong Kong could be further reduced by:

1. Stopping the sale of live poultry directly to the public
2. Stopping the live importation of poultry from outside Hong Kong

With regards to poultry not only does the current system have an inherent increased risk of zoonotic disease but is also a concern in terms of animal welfare.

With the poultry trade birds are being subjected to unnecessary stressors and negative events prior to being slaughtered for food.

Best practices for food animals in terms of welfare include minimizing the distances and time in relation to transport and also should minimise handling and holding related welfare issues prior to slaughter.

This does not happen with the current system.

A further area for concern is **the trade in pet birds** which also remains problematic on many fronts (including regulation, bird welfare and conservation).

Shops selling pet birds can be grouped together (as in Yuen Po Street Bird Garden) presenting an increased risk of disease transmission as large numbers of birds from multiple sources are held in close proximity - often for long periods. This environment alone presents an increased

challenge to bio-security and an increased risk of a disease event, but this is increased still further by visitor behaviour as they move between the different shops.

As such the current strategy for the pet bird trade should be reviewed and regulation, oversight and bio-security measures enhanced.

One area that is often overlooked in the discussion of bird related veterinary public health matters is the ongoing practice of **religious release**. Birds are often used during such practices.

A HKU study in 2004 -2005 (carried out by surveying groups involved in the practice and also the traders supplying some of the birds to be released) estimated that between 400,000 and 1 million birds could be released each year in Hong Kong.

When compared to the 2005 Government trade figures of approximately 120,000 birds it seems that a significant number of birds used for religious release originate from questionable sources. It is suggested that a significant number are smuggled in.

Obviously such birds are not necessarily subjected to any AI prevention or surveillance measures or other disease screening processes.

On release these birds mix with the indigenous Hong Kong bird population and could be a route for the introduction of disease into the native Hong Kong bird population. There are also serious welfare and conservation issues associated with the capture, transport and release. Many birds are not fit or suited for release (with a high number dying shortly after release) and they may be exotic species which subsequently compete with indigenous species.

This practice should be halted.

Many of the issues we have raised should be addressed through a multi-pronged approach with improved veterinary public health measures and risk management, dialogue with stakeholders (such as groups involved in religious release), improved regulation and oversight and most importantly public information and education campaigns aiming to educate and subsequently change behaviours.

**Finally** we reiterate that when a disease event occurs and, as part of the disease control process, birds need to be killed it is important that international best practices are followed and that this is done as humanely as possible and takes into account the welfare of both birds and humans.