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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 11 March 2014**

Avian influenza prevention measures

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns expressed by members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene ("the Panel") in respect of the preventive and surveillance measures against avian influenza ("AI") for both local and imported poultry since 2008.

Background

2. AI is caused by influenza viruses that mainly affect birds and poultry. However, some can infect humans and cause disease. The most well known example is the AI subtype H5N1 viruses which have caused human disease and deaths. The first case of human infection of the H5N1 viruses in Hong Kong was in August 1997. Since then, four imported human cases were recorded, with two in 2003, and one each in 2010 and 2012. No AI outbreaks have occurred on local chicken farms since December 2008¹. To enable early detection of AI viruses and prevention of AI outbreaks, the Administration has implemented a surveillance programme for both local poultry and imported poultry since 1998. To further enhance surveillance, the Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") has provided a sick and dead wild bird collection service since October 2005. Members of the public could report to AFCD the presence of sick and dead birds for collection and laboratory examination. Other main preventive and surveillance measures adopted by the

¹ After the first AI outbreak occurred on local chicken farms in 1998, three further AI outbreaks had occurred in 2001, 2002 and 2008 respectively.

Administration to reduce the risk of AI outbreaks in Hong Kong are as follows -

- (a) implementing a surveillance programme to monitor the live poultry supply chain, pet bird shops, recreational parks and the wild bird environment including wild bird parks;
 - (b) requiring all local chicken farms to vaccinate their chickens and adopt stringent biosecurity measures;
 - (c) implementing import control by requiring all imported Mainland poultry sourced from registered farms with health certificates; requiring all chickens imported from the Mainland to be vaccinated; and conducting regular inspections by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department to registered poultry farms on the Mainland to ensure compliance with AI control requirements;
 - (d) imposing stringent hygiene requirements in the wholesale market and retail outlets, including thorough cleansing and disinfection of transport cages and vehicles; cleansing of the faecal trays of cages housing chickens at retail outlets after the end of daily business; no overcrowding of live chickens in the cages; and market "rest days" twice every month to reduce the virus load in the market;
 - (e) banning overnight stocking of live poultry at all retail outlets and prohibiting the sale of live waterfowl, which can be natural carriers of AI viruses, in retail outlets;
 - (f) banning the rearing of backyard poultry;
 - (g) preventing illegal importation and smuggling of live poultry and raw poultry meat into Hong Kong through joint-departmental efforts;
 - (h) monitoring of the AI situation in humans by the Department of Health, as well as raising the community's awareness on the prevention of AI by organizing education forums for different target groups; and
 - (i) implementing a zonal approach policy to institutionalize the suspension of import of live poultry and poultry products from Guangdong Province if there is any confirmed H5N1 highly pathogenic AI ("HPAI") outbreak in the province.
3. According to the Administration, at present, all live poultry and poultry

products bound for Hong Kong would have been tested against H7 AI beforehand and only those which have passed the test would be issued a health certificate for export to Hong Kong. The Mainland authorities have also stepped up surveillance in live poultry and poultry products bound for Hong Kong by increasing the sample size and the frequency of farm inspections. Hong Kong has also since 11 April 2013 started to conduct rapid tests (i.e. PCR test") for influenza A virus, covering both H5 and H7 viruses, on imported live poultry upon its arrival at Man Kam To Control Point. In the event that there is any poultry AI infection case in Hong Kong (covering both H5 and H7 AI cases), the Administration would undertake culling operations as necessary in accordance with the advice of the World Organization for Animal Health ("OIE"), as well as suspend the import of live poultry and conduct thorough cleansing of sites concerned in order to minimize the risk of a major AI outbreak in Hong Kong.

4. In view of the H7N9 AI outbreak in the Mainland in April 2013, the Administration has agreed, as a special arrangement, with the Mainland authorities that import of live poultry and/or poultry products would be suspended from registered farms/processing plants within a radius of 13km from an infected farm/live bird market in case of any confirmed H7N9 poultry case. Since 24 January 2014, the Administration has further implemented H7 AI serological testing to strengthen its capability in background monitoring and provide early warning for AI.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. Issues relating to the preventive and surveillance measures against AI implemented for both local and imported poultry had been discussed at a number of meetings of the Panel since 2008. The major deliberations and concerns of members are summarized below.

Measures to minimize the risk of AI outbreaks on local chicken farms

6. In response to members' view that the Administration should step up surveillance and enhance monitoring of local chicken farms, the Administration advised that AFCD had visited all the local chicken farms to help them develop a tailor-made biosecurity plan covering bird protection, rodent control and farm management practices. To facilitate early detection of AI, AFCD had also increased the frequency of inspections on chicken farms with stepped up veterinarian audit.

7. Some members questioned the effectiveness of using sentinel chickens (i.e. unvaccinated chickens) as a means to detect whether a chicken farm was

infected with the AI viruses. According to the Administration, if there were no sentinel chickens placed among poultry on a farm, the chicken farmer might not be alerted in the first instance when the chickens were infected with the AI viruses, as vaccinated chickens could still be infected and alive and be able to shed viruses. Moreover, the symptoms that the infected chickens displayed were generally not obvious during the onset of the disease.

8. Concern was also raised over the efficacy of the vaccine used by the local chicken farms against the AI viruses. According to the Administration, the Investigation Group on Vaccine Study had been set up to conduct research and tests on the efficacy of the vaccine used in Hong Kong and to explore alternative vaccines. The Administration would keep in view the development of new vaccines and consider introducing new vaccine into Hong Kong when its efficacy, safety and quality were proven. The new Re-6 H5N1 AI vaccine that conferred better protection against the predominant strain of the AI viruses circulating in wild birds in the region had thus been introduced since November 2012. All local poultry would be vaccinated with the new vaccine by mid 2013.

Preventive and control measures at the retail level

9. Some members queried the effectiveness of banning the keeping of live chickens overnight at retail outlets in reducing the risk of AI outbreaks. In their view, a more practical approach to prevent AI outbreaks was to enhance biosecurity measures at all levels of the supply chain. There was also concern that the introduction of the compulsory banning of overnight stocking of live poultry at retail outlets was detrimental to the whole live poultry trade in Hong Kong. Some members cautioned that a balance should be struck between safeguarding public health and the interests of the trade. The Administration was urged to work out complementary measures to assist live poultry wholesalers, retailers and transport operators in running their business under the new mode of operation.

10. According to the Administration, the detection of the AI viruses in June 2008 in environmental swabs collected at four retail markets indicated that the preventive and control measures put in place were inadequate in containing the public health risks posed by AI, especially at the retail level. While the Administration was well aware of the difficulties of the trade, it stressed the need to enhance the measures to arrest any possible spread of the AI viruses in Hong Kong. It was also necessary to implement "no overnight keeping of live poultry" in order to further reduce the health risk posed by AI and help combat the smuggling of live chickens. The Administration considered that the trade had adapted quite well and declined to conduct a review on the arrangement of "no overnight keeping of live poultry" as suggested by members.

Control on the import of live poultry or poultry products

11. Members noted that under the zonal approach policy, the import of live poultry and poultry products from the "import control zone" (i.e. the area of 13 km radius from the possible place of infection) would be prohibited for 21 days if there was a confirmed human case of HPAI infection within Guangdong Province. In the event of a confirmed outbreak of HPAI in any registered poultry farm in Guangdong Province, the Administration would suspend the import of live poultry and poultry products from the whole Guangdong Province for a period of up to 21 days. In September 2012, a consensus was reached between Hong Kong and the relevant Mainland authorities to extend the policy, making it applicable to HPAI outbreaks, in any part of the Mainland.

12. While expressing support for the zonal approach policy, members expressed concern that the time lapse between the patient's disease onset and notification on confirmed human cases of AI infection from the Mainland authorities might undermine the effectiveness of the policy. Concern was also raised about the safety of live chickens imported from the Mainland and the measures taken by the Administration to ensure that these imported live chickens were not infected with AI.

13. The Administration advised that all live chickens supplied to Hong Kong from the Mainland should come from registered farms and had to be quarantined for five days and tested free of AI virus before export to Hong Kong. Samples from these chickens would also be collected at the Man Kam To Control Point for retest. These chickens would be kept at the wholesale market until the test results are available. Only chickens with satisfactory testing result would be released for sale.

14. There was a concern about the biosecurity requirements of the registered chicken farms in the Mainland. As advised by the Administration, these registered farms were required to meet the requirements as set out in the inspection and quarantine measures for live poultry exported to Hong Kong and Macao issued by the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine ("AQSIQ"). AQSIQ's inspection and quarantine measures and the relevant AI control measures adopted in Hong Kong were made with reference to the framework for AI control proposed by OIE. The officer of the Centre for Food Safety officers conducted regular inspections to the registered poultry farms in the Mainland and they found that their management and compliance with the AI control requirements were so far satisfactory.

Review of AI preventive measures

15. Considering that AI had been well-controlled in Hong Kong, some members held the view that the Administration should regularly review the AI risk in Hong Kong and consider relaxing the control on the sale of live poultry and the rearing capacity of local chicken farms. In the Administration's view, the low AI risk in Hong Kong was the result of a basket of complementary measures implemented, which included the prohibition of the sale of live waterfowl in retail outlets, the control on the rearing capacity of local poultry farms, the enforcement of biosecurity measures at local farms and the wholesale level, and the prohibition of overnight stocking of live poultry at all retail outlets. The Administration stressed the need for maintaining the existing control measures in order to contain the risk of poultry infection with the AI viruses.

16. Some members expressed concern about the supply of live chickens in Hong Kong. They considered that the number of daily live chickens supply should be increased so as to meet the market demand and bring down the price of live chickens. The Administration advised that to effectively contain the risk of AI, the number and rearing capacity of chicken farms and the supply of live chickens should be kept unchanged. Members were also advised that the market demand for imported chilled chickens had gradually increased in recent years and had largely substituted that for live chickens.

17. There was a view that the Administration should increase the supply of day-old chicks from the Mainland, so as to promote the sustainable development of the local poultry trade. According to the Administration, the supply of Mainland day-old chicks was dictated by a few factors including local demand, the number of Mainland day-old chicks available for export to Hong Kong, the AI risk in the region, and the production capacity of local hatcheries.

Smuggling of live or slaughtered raw chickens into Hong Kong

18. Members expressed concern about the smuggling of live or slaughtered raw chickens into Hong Kong. They called on the Administration to step up enforcement actions against poultry smuggling activities at the border and strengthen communication with the Mainland authorities to combat illegal poultry importation activities across the border.

19. The Administration advised that carrying live or slaughtered poultry into Hong Kong across the boundary was prohibited. To combat against poultry smuggling activities, apart from conducting more inspections on travellers who were suspected of bringing in live poultry when crossing the border, detector dogs were deployed to ensure effective surveillance at the immigration checkpoints. Under the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612), retailers were

required to provide the procurement records of food, which would facilitate the tracking of the sources of smuggled poultry. The Administration also assured members that it had maintained close and direct communication with the Mainland authorities regarding enforcement against poultry smuggling activities and the contingency measures in case of AI outbreaks.

Recent developments

20. On 27 January 2014, a number of samples from a batch of live chicken imported from the Mainland were confirmed H7 positive in the H7 Polymerase Chain Reaction test. The Government adopted a series of measures to prevent the virus from spreading into the community. Among these measures adopted was the closure of the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market ("the Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market") for 21 days until 18 February 2014, during which trading of both Mainland and local live poultry were suspended.

21. The Panel held a special meeting on 29 January 2014 to receive an update from the Administration on the prevention and control of AI. Members raised concern about the impacts of the Administration's decision to cull all live poultry at the Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market and imposition of a 21-day ban of the live poultry trade on the affected trade including local chicken farmers, wholesalers and retailers. To prevent the recurrence of similar incidents, members urged the Government to consider separating the supply chain of local live chickens from those imported from the Mainland and the trade's suggestion that live chickens imported from the Mainland should not be transported to the CSW Wholesale Market until they were confirmed to have no AI viruses infection.

22. Members were advised by the Administration that the main risk source of AI infection by humans was from the contact with infected live poultry. On public health grounds, consideration should be given on whether Hong Kong should continue with the practice enabling close contact between human and poultry. In the Administration's view, it was time for the Government, the poultry trade and the citizens to rethink whether there should still be selling of live poultry in Hong Kong in the long run. The Government would consider engagement of a consultant to study and make recommendation in this regard.

23. Members passed two motions at the Panel's special meeting, requesting the Administration to propose plans to improve the live chicken supply chain system and offer compensation to relevant parties of the affected trade and urging the Administration to expeditiously identify sites for relocating the CSW Wholesale Market. The wordings of the motions are in **Appendices I and II**.

24. On 19 February 2014, the Panel held a special meeting to discuss the Administration's proposed compensation and ex-gratia payments package for parties affected by AI incident. Members attending the meeting generally supported the proposal, which was subsequently approved by the Finance Committee at its meeting on 21 February 2014.

25. The Administration will brief the Panel on the latest development on the prevention and control of AI on 11 March 2014.

Relevant papers

26. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in **Appendix III**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
6 March 2014

(Translation)

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Motion passed under the agenda item
"Update on the prevention and control of avian influenza" at the special
meeting on 29 January 2014**

"That, as the processes of the live chicken supply system are imperfect, live chickens from the Mainland are mixed with local live chickens before they are confirmed to meet safety standards, thus causing local chicken farmers to suffer losses as well because chickens imported from the Mainland are found infected with avian influenza, and this is indeed an unexpected calamity. This Panel holds the view that the Administration should expeditiously propose plans to improve the live chicken supply system, immediately study the segregation of local-farm live chickens for independent conveyance to markets, support local agriculture and farmers, and offer compensation to relevant parties such as local chicken farmers, wholesalers, retailers, etc. in respect of this incident, as well as providing other appropriate support."

Moved by : Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan; Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Amended by : Hon Steven HO Chun-yin; Hon WONG Kwok-hing,
BBS, MH; Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, SBS, JP;
Hon Vincent FANG Kang, SBS, JP

(Translation)

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Motion passed under the agenda item
"Update on the prevention and control of avian influenza"
at the special meeting on 29 January 2014**

"That this Panel urges the Administration to look squarely at the strong aspirations of residents in the vicinity of the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market, expeditiously identify sites for relocating the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market to make it far away from residential areas, so as to safeguard public safety."

Moved by : Dr Hon Priscilla LEUNG Mei-fun, SBS, JP
Seconded by : Hon CHAN Han-pan

Appendix III

Relevant papers on the avian influenza prevention measures

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	8.4.2008 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)1466/07-08(01)
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	16.6.2008 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	27.6.2008 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	22.10.2008 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	18.12.2008 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	10.2.2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	10.3.2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	9.11.2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	12.6.2012 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	12.3.2013 (Item VII)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	16.4.2013 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	19.11.2013 (Item II)	Agenda

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	29.1.2014 (Item I)	Agenda
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	19.2.2014 (Item I)	Agenda

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