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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the special meeting on 19 November 2013

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 2008[1]. 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; and

(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.

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 against H7 AI 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 Animal Health Organization, 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.

Deliberations of the Panel

4. 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

5. Members noted with concern the biosecurity vulnerabilities and breaches on local chicken farms as revealed by an epidemiology report on an AI outbreak on a chicken farm in Yuen Long ("the index farm") in 2008. Members were of the view that the Administration should step up surveillance and enhance monitoring of local chicken farms. Consideration should also be given to providing financial assistance to chicken farm owners to help them implement the enhanced biosecurity measures.

6. According to the Administration, 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. The Administration also advised that AFCD had helped the local poultry farmers improve their farms' biosecurity measures through the provision of low interest unsecured loans, up to $130,000, under the Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Loan Fund and the J.E. Joseph Trust Fund.

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, having regard to the fact that both vaccinated chickens and sentinel chickens on the index farm died from being infected with the H5N1 viruses. Moreover, as sentinel chickens could be infected with the AI viruses more easily than vaccinated chickens, these members considered it unfair to the poultry farmers if all live poultry on the farm had to be culled and

destroyed even when only one sentinel chicken was found infected with the AI viruses. These members also pointed out that the Mainland had dispensed with the practice of using sentinel chickens to detect the AI viruses.

8. 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.

9. 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

10. 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 expressed concern that a majority of live poultry retailers would withdraw from the market and in turn, force local farmers and wholesalers to cease their operation. While some other members were supportive of the arrangement of "no overnight keeping of live poultry" at the retail level, they cautioned that a balance should be struck between safeguarding public health and the interests of the trade. They urged the Administration to work out complementary measures to assist live poultry wholesalers, retailers and transport operators in running their business under the new mode of operation.

11. 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

12. Members noted that the Administration had developed a zonal approach policy to control the import of live poultry and poultry products under different scenarios of Highly Pathogenic AI ("HPAI") outbreaks in Guangdong Province. Under the 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.

13. 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.

14. 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.

Review of AI preventive measures

15. In response to members' enquiry about the tools to measure the

effectiveness of the various initiatives taken to reduce the risk of AI outbreaks, the Administration advised that there was yet scientific literature on the measurement of AI risk. Nevertheless, various risk indicators, developed from the past experience in handling AI outbreaks, had been adopted by the Administration in formulating strategies and measures to tackle the problem.

16. 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.

17. 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.

18. 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.

19. Pointing out the difficulties faced by the local chicken farmers under the tough control measures, some members urged the Administration to formulate a policy conducive to the long-term development of the live poultry trade.

<u>Smuggling of live or slaughtered raw chickens into Hong Kong</u>

20. 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.

21. 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

22. On 6 November 2013, the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health received notification from the Health and Family Planning Commission of Guangdong Province concerning a new confirmed case of H7N9 AI human infection in Dongguan, Guangdong Province. According to the press release issued by the Government on the same day, there have been two laboratory confirmed human cases of AI H7N9 in the Mainland. This has caused public concern about the safety of live poultry imported from the Mainland and whether the import of live poultry from the registered farms in Guangdong Province should be suspended. The transcript of remarks made by the Secretary for Food and Health to the press on the matter (Chinese version only) is in **Appendix I**.

23. The Administration will brief the Panel on the subject of prevention and control of AI on 19 November 2013.

Relevant papers

24. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in **Appendix II**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
18 November 2013

附錄 I
Appendix I

新聞公報

食物及衞生局局長談季節性流感及禽流感
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以下是食物及衞生局局長高永文今日（十一月六日）下午在牛頭角賽馬會普通科門診診所視察「二〇一三／一四年度政府防疫注射計劃」推行情況後，會見新聞界的談話內容：

食物及衞生局局長：我今天聯同食物及衞生局常任秘書長（衞生）袁銘輝先生、醫院管理局（醫管局）行政總裁梁栢賢醫生、衞生防護中心總監梁挺雄醫生，以及醫管局九龍東聯網總監（雷操奭醫生），一起接受季節性流感疫苗注射，提醒市民，香港每年也有兩個季節性流感高峰期，主要的高峰期在冬天至春天之間。在較早前，政府的季節性流感疫苗資助計劃及季節性流感疫苗接種計劃（「政府防疫注射計劃」）已分別展開。（資助）計劃是資助兒童及長者在私家醫生（的診所）接種疫苗，疫苗當然包括（預防）季節性流感及肺炎鏈球菌，而政府的接種流感疫苗計劃，是協助高危或高風險的群組，尤其是患慢性疾病的住院病人接種疫苗，這兩個計劃均已開展。為甚麼需要這些計劃？當然，流感本身不是嚴重的疾病，但小部分的人士，即使（身體）健康，患上季節性流感後也可能引致併發症，而這些併發症的危險性較高，尤其是身體抵抗力較低，患慢性疾病的高危群組，萬一患上流感，（發生）併發症的危險性更高。因此，我們第一個原因是希望市民盡量接種季節性流感疫苗，尤其是高危群組；另一個原因是較間接的原因，若在流感高峰期社會上大規模爆發流感，萬一同時受禽流感入侵，在這情況下，會造成有利的環境，（可能）讓兩種流感病毒在同一人士的身體內造成「洗牌」效應，這是我們不希望看到的。若經過基因重組，我們不能估計病毒在基因重組後所造成的效果。若在基因重組後，流感變得較嚴重、致病性較高或更容易適應人類的環境，我們會擔心。因此，我們希望市民盡量接種季節性流感疫苗。

另外，每逢冬天來臨前，會有較多病人前往公立醫院，當然不可以說是完全因為季節性流感，不過有季節性流感及類似流感病徵的人士在冬天會增加，加上其他疾病，病發會增加，以致醫管局的床位及服務量會較緊張。

記者：（有關東莞市三歲男童確診感染甲型禽流感（H7N9），該男童居所十三公里範圍內有一個供港註冊活家禽養殖場，會否暫停該養殖場的活雞供港？若否，有何措施減低香港的風險？）

食物及衞生局局長：正如我們一直的設想，較早時亦已預料到，當開始踏入冬季，氣溫降至低於攝氏二十度，流感，包括禽流感病毒便開始活躍，其實並非昨日開始，於一、兩星期前已出現，在入冬後內地不同地方可能出現散發性的人類感染甲型禽流感（H7N9）病例，這兩天在東莞出現病例，華東地區也會有些病例。當病毒影響到廣東，尤其是鄰近香港的地區，我們便會較緊張。今年年初至年中，華東地區開始爆發人類感染甲型禽流感（H7N9），直到現在，香港的醫療體系和負責食物安全的有關當局，已採取一系列的措施，這些措施迄今並未鬆懈。每次再出現（人類感染甲型禽流感H7N9）的情況，我們也會進行風險評估。我們（今天）剛舉行了會議，再針對這次（病例）出現的情況作出風險評估。我們至今掌握有關（禽流感）H7N9的病毒類型，而就今次（病例），專家當然會將病毒分離或培養後，再研究其基因。直到目前為止，仍未發現有關的基因出現

重大轉變。因此，至今的風險評估維持在一向的水平。

在人流方面，我們在口岸會繼續及加強入境的體溫探測（措施）。我亦呼籲大家前往其他地方旅行時，尤其是內地受影響的地區，需要小心，不要接觸家禽、不要前往家禽市場、不要接觸野生動物及不要進食野味。若有不適，回港後一定要通知我們。另外，我亦關注到跨境學童的數目不少，我今早與教育局局長吳克儉溝通，教育局會即時針對有關機構，發出一些提醒。衞生防護中心亦會與教育當局協調，檢視如何在這方面加強（健康）教育工作，以提升包括跨境學童在內的相關人士的健康意識。

在醫院方面，除了較早時梁（挺雄）醫生說的「冬防」，即是針對冬天（某些疫病）病發率較高及季節性流感（作出預防外），醫院針對H7N9的早診斷、早隔離，以及傳染病控制措施也需要加強及繼續（進行）。

在家禽控制方面，內地迄今仍針對今次東莞個案的病人曾接觸的家禽市場，進行檢驗。其實有關當局已報告，他們已採取局部撲殺，亦引入了一連串針對家禽批發及零售市場的控制措施，這些措施與香港（採取）的相似，包括清洗（市場）、停市日，以及「活雞日日清」等政策，希望減低相關的風險。

另外，我們明天會到深圳出席每年也舉行的五地（粵港澳深珠）檢驗檢疫研討交流會，我會到深圳出席會議。我們亦會藉此機會再與內地有關當局跟進相關的防控措施，包括你剛才提及的問題，現時針對H7N9，若在家禽當中發現病毒，在其十三公里範圍內的供港活雞場及冰凍禽肉處理場，也會暫停供港。有關措施暫時未有如H5N1般，在人類感染H7N9的病例中實施，主要的原因是H7N9在家禽中屬低致病性。就這事宜，我們會一直與內地的檢驗檢疫部門繼續跟進。在現時已實施（的措施），例如對入口活雞進行快速測試，以及在各供應鏈中（採取的）風險管理措施，在進行這些措施後，有些專家在現有的措施上，再提出任何再加強風險管理的措施，我們也會考慮。現時針對活家禽供應的H7N9風險管理措施，其實香港已達到相當高的水平，亦相信是全世界其中一個最高水平的地方。專家有兩種不同的意見，有些專家認為這水平已足夠，我們應該繼續維持這水平；有些專家提出相關的不同措施，例如（出現）人類H7N9病例，亦應考慮在十三公里範圍內暫停活雞供港，甚至另外（提出的意見）是血清測試。我亦同意，在現行已很嚴謹的風險管理措施上，再增加這些措施，可能在某程度上能再增加風險管理的成效。不過，在原本已相當嚴謹的風險管理措施當中再增加（措施），專家對此有不同意見。我們亦會繼續與內地有關當局跟進這些措施是否適用。

記者：是否短期內不會考慮（東莞的確診個案）暫停十三公里內雞場的活雞供港？若不暫停，會否令香港出現H7N9的風險增加？

食物及衞生局局長：這方面我一定會繼續與有關部門跟進，我們明天會舉行會議。目前，香港針對活家禽這方面的風險管理措施已經相當嚴謹，（我們在長沙灣）臨時家禽批發市場已實施改善措施，確保內地與香港活雞分流處理。就內地（輸港）的活雞，首先要接受內地與香港共同進行的快速測試，這是一個把守的關卡，（內地活雞）進入香港後，需在活家禽批發市場等候快速測試的結果，等候當中，有段時間內地與香港的活雞會同時處於（長沙灣臨時家禽批發市場）內，我們已改善了（長沙灣臨時家禽批發市場）裏的設施，確保內地供港活雞與本地飼養的活雞有所分流，大家應該理解，香港在活家禽方面所採取的預防禽流感H7N9風險管理措施已非常嚴謹。

記者：你提到措施嚴謹，但雞隻沒有發病並不代表沒受感染，也有一定風險，為何不（暫停東莞確診個案）十三公里內供港註冊活家禽養殖場（的雞隻入口）？是否因為內地不同意？

食物及衞生局局長：實際上並沒有科學證據證明現時內地供港的活家禽帶有禽流感H7N9（病毒），暫時在流行病學最大的可能性，大部分的內地病例也是與活家禽批發市場有關，並無明顯跡象顯示這些人類的病例，與內地供港活家禽飼養場有流行病學的關連，這是第一點。第二點，內地針對各層次的活家禽供應鏈，無論是飼養場、批發市場和零售點，已進行了大量樣本的檢驗，迄今，在供港活家禽養殖場內，並沒有發現H7N9（個案），包括現時的東莞病例，其十三公里範圍以內的供港活家禽養殖場，食物安全中心人員五月曾往視察，那裏的衞生環境及控制措施是合格的，而該養殖場迄今並沒有檢測到有H7N9（禽流感病毒）。就科學證據來說，暫時對部分專家而言，並不支持這樣做。當然亦有專家認為，即使沒有科學證據，亦應以防萬一，但這便會變為純粹政治的決定，所以我們進行這些工作時，最好有科學證據，我們作出一個建基於科學證據的決定，會較易服眾。我們會繼續跟進這事宜，若有任何進展便會向市民公布。

完

２０１３年１１月６日（星期三）
香港時間２０時０５分

Appendix II

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
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Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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