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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 11 April 2017

Public consultation on the way forward for the live poultry trade

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the consultancy study commissioned by the Administration on the future of the live poultry trade and summarizes the views and concerns of members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene ("the Panel") on relevant issues.

Background

Preventive and control measures against avian influenza in relation to poultry

2. Avian influenza ("AI") is caused by influenza viruses that mainly affect birds and poultry. Among the different groups of AI viruses, H5N1 is of particular concern because it has a recognized ability to pass directly from birds to humans and is highly pathogenic. H5N1 virus has been circulating in Southeast Asia and detected in Hong Kong in poultry and/or wild birds almost every year from 1997. Since the first AI outbreak hit Hong Kong in 1997¹, the Government has implemented a series of preventive and control measures to reduce the risk of AI at all levels of the live poultry supply chain. The measures include surveillance at local poultry farms; AI vaccination of local and imported poultry; stringent hygiene requirements on wholesale and retail markets; prohibition of overnight stocking of live poultry at the retail level; and enhanced import control, etc. According to the Administration, with the above

¹ After the first AI outbreak occurred in local chicken farms in 1998, three further AI outbreaks had occurred in 2001, 2002 and 2008 respectively. In May 2001, there was an outbreak of AI in 10 retail markets. This was followed by another outbreak of AI in two chicken farms in Kam Tin area in February 2002. In December 2008, there was an outbreak of AI in one chicken farm in Yuen Long.

preventive and control measures in place, the risk of AI outbreaks in Hong Kong has since been kept under control and there has not been locally acquired case of human infection with H5 or H7 virus in Hong Kong since 1997.

3. In tandem, the Government has tried to contain the size of the live poultry trade in order to reduce the likelihood of human contact with live poultry. The Government introduced voluntary licence surrender schemes and a buyout scheme for poultry retailers, wholesalers, transporters and farmers in 2004 and 2008 respectively. As a result, the number of retail outlets decreased from over 800 prior to the introduction of the first voluntary surrender scheme to 132 in 2013 and wholesales from 87 to 23. According to the information provided by the Administration in February 2017, the number of chicken farms has also reduced from close to 200 in early 2000s to 29 at present. The total licensed rearing capacity in these 29 poultry farms in Hong Kong has dropped from 3.9 million in 2004 to about 1.3 million at present.

The Government's long-term policy considerations on live poultry supply

4. On 27 January 2014, a number of samples from a batch of live chickens imported from a Mainland registered poultry farm were confirmed positive in the H7 Polymerase Chain Reaction ("PCR") test. As the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") declared the Cheung San Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market ("CSWTWPM") as an infected place, some 22 000 live poultry in CSWTWPM were culled on 28 January 2014 and the market was closed for 21 days for thorough cleansing and disinfection. During the closure of CSWTWPM, time trading of live poultry (including imported and local live poultry) in Hong Kong was suspended. When CSWTWPM resumed live poultry trading on 19 February 2014, the Government decided to suspend the import of live poultry intended to be slaughtered for consumption for around four months. Compensation and ex-gratia payments were granted to poultry operators affected by this AI incident.

5. Subsequently, there were suggestions from the public and the poultry industry that the Government should segregate the imported and local live poultry and hold the imported poultry at a suitable location until the AI testing results were available before releasing them to CSWTWPM, so as not to disturb the supply of local live poultry to the market. The Government advised that as the deliberation process and the setting up of temporary holding facilities for imported live poultry would take time, it had to consider other practicable alternative arrangements such that the import of live poultry from the Mainland would be resumed as early as possible in a situation where the AI risk was under control. After assessing various proposals, the Government decided to pursue the proposal of setting up a check-point for local live poultry at the Government

farm in Ta Kwu Ling ("TKL")². On 30 December 2014, the Government found in a consignment of imported live poultry a number of samples which tested positive for H7 AI by PCR test. On 31 December 2014, all the 19 000 live poultry concerned were culled and thereafter CSWTWPM was closed for 21 days for cleansing and disinfection. The Government subsequently made use of the TKL Check-point for dispatching local chickens to retail outlets to ensure the continued supply of local live poultry.

6. In its papers submitted to the Panel in January 2015 on measures taken in response to the confirmation of the positive H7 AI samples found in imported live poultry, the Administration stressed that contact with infected live poultry was the main source of risk insofar as human infection by AI was concerned. Despite the concerted efforts made by the local live poultry trade, the Government, the Mainland inspection and quarantine authorities and the farms supplying Hong Kong, no surveillance system could attain zero risk. On public health grounds, consideration should thus be given to the question of whether Hong Kong, being a place with scarce land resources and a densely populated city, should continue with the existing practice which allowed close contact between humans and poultry. According to the Administration, it had observed in recent years a change in the eating habit of the ordinary citizens in that there had been a growing consumption of chilled and frozen poultry on the whole. It was considered an opportune time for the community to reflect whether the selling of live poultry in Hong Kong remained appropriate in the long run. In mid-June 2015, the Administration commissioned a consultant to study the future of the live poultry trade in Hong Kong and to make recommendations in this regard.

Members' concerns

7. Members' major views and concerns on issues relating to the way forward for the live poultry trade are summarized below.

Suspension of imported live poultry

8. Considering that there had not been AI outbreaks in local chicken farms in recent years despite occasional outbreaks in the Mainland, some members called on the Administration to suspend the import of live poultry from the Mainland to reduce the risk of AI outbreak in Hong Kong. In these members' views, the Administration should import chilled chickens only. Some other members, however, did not support suspending the import of live poultry from

² Details of the Administration's response to the suggestion of separating the supply chains of imported and local live poultry are set out in the Administration's paper submitted to the Panel in March 2014 (LC Paper No. CB(2)992/13-14(03)).

the Mainland, as many members of the public still preferred consuming live chickens to chilled or frozen chickens. They considered that the Administration should be mindful of the possibility that Mainland registered poultry farms might demand compensation from local live poultry operators for breach of contract if the Administration decided to cease the import of live poultry from the Mainland.

9. The Administration advised that Hong Kong had put in place a rigorous system of AI control. In view of the latest situation of AI in neighbouring areas, the Administration had reviewed and further enhanced the surveillance, prevention and control measures. For public health considerations and formulation of policy in the long term, a consultancy study was commissioned in mid-June 2015 to study the future of the live poultry trade in Hong Kong. The Administration would carefully consider the recommendations to be put forward by the consultant and fully engage stakeholders to seek their views before deciding on the future of the live poultry trade.

10. Members noted with concern that while the supply of minor poultry (e.g. pigeon, common pheasant and silky fowl) from the Mainland remained stable, there had not been live chickens imported from the Mainland since February 2016. The Administration advised that importation of live chickens from the Mainland was not prohibited. The current supply situation was primarily a commercial decision on the part of Mainland farms. The Food and Health Bureau had been liaising with the relevant Mainland authorities closely on the supply of live poultry.

Supply of live chickens by local farms

11. Some members were of the views that to achieve self-sufficiency, the Administration should encourage local chicken farmers to increase the supply of live chickens and devise measures to facilitate the long-term development of the local live poultry trade. There was a suggestion that the number of live poultry stalls should be increased and evenly distributed in the territory to meet the public need. The Administration advised that the total rearing capacity of the existing 29 local chicken farms as licensed by AFCD was about 1.3 million chickens. In 2016, the local chicken farms supplied about four million live chickens to the market (i.e. an average daily supply of around 10 000 chickens). The supply was quite stable throughout the year and could by and large meet the market demand, even though the rearing capacity of some farms had not been put to full use. Under such circumstances, it would be premature to discuss the question of reviewing the operational scale of the local poultry trade.

12. There was also 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 subject to 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.

Separation of supply chains of imported and local live poultry

13. An enquiry was raised on whether the Administration would identify two separate sites to segregate imported live poultry from local live poultry to mitigate the AI risks in the long run. There was a suggestion that the Administration should consider identifying a site near the boundary for the temporary holding of imported live poultry.

14. According to the Administration, it had made endeavours to identify possible suitable sites, including sites in Fu Tei Au and Yuen Long, for the temporary holding of imported live poultry until the test results were available. However, due to opposition of local residents to the setting up of such facilities in their neighbourhood, the Administration could not pursue further the establishment of separate facilities for imported and local live poultry on these sites. The Administration had also examined a site near the Man Kam To boundary crossing but found it not suitable for keeping a few thousands imported live chickens for a couple of hours while waiting for the test results before releasing them to the wholesale market. The Administration hoped that the trade would appreciate the difficulties in identifying suitable sites for the separation of imported and local live poultry and would work with the Administration to improve the operation of the TKL Check-point.

Recent developments

15. Over the years, there have been repeated calls from different quarters for the relocation of CSWTWPM to reduce the potential health risk posed to residents in the vicinity of Cheung Sha Wan. The Administration has advised that it has been looking for sites suitable for relocating the wholesale market, but is yet able to do so. At the request of members, the Administration will give an update on the latest progress of the wholesale market consultancy study, including the feasibility study on relocating CSWTWPM, when reporting to the Panel on the way forward for the live poultry trade.

16. The Administration will brief members on the outcome of the consultancy study on the future of the live poultry trade at the Panel meeting on 11 April 2017.

Relevant papers

17. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
5 April 2017

**Relevant papers on
public consultation on the way forward for the live poultry trade**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	19.11.2013 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
	29.1.2014 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
	19.2.2014 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
	11.3.2014 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
	13.1.2015 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
	14.2.2017 (Item IV)	Agenda

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