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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 13 June 2017**

Outcome of the consultancy study on the way forward for the live poultry trade in Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper highlights the key recommendations of the consultancy study on the way forward for the live poultry trade in Hong Kong, and summarizes the major views and concerns of members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene ("the Panel") on the subject.

Background

2. According to the Administration, highly pathogenic Avian Influenza ("AI") viruses have been circulating in many parts of the world and threatening Hong Kong. Since the first H5N1 AI outbreak in 1997 causing six fatalities, there have been from time to time imported cases of human infection of H5N1 AI and incidents of H5 AI found in the live poultry supply chain. Since 2013, H7N9 AI virus began to emerge. So far, in Hong Kong, there have been 21 imported cases of human infection recorded, two incidents of detection of H7N9 among imported live poultry leading to culling of a total of over 41 000 live poultry in 2014 and one case of detection of H7N9 AI virus from environmental samples collected in a public market in 2016.

3. Over the years, the Government and the local live poultry trade, as well as the relevant Mainland authorities and the farms supplying Hong Kong, have collaboratively built up a resilient and stringent surveillance and control system for the purpose of reducing AI risk in Hong Kong. While there has been no local human infection of H5 or H7 AI virus after 1997, the emergence of H7N9

incidents has prompted the Government to review and consider, on public health grounds, whether Hong Kong being a place with scarce land resources and a densely populated city should continue with the sale of live poultry. To this end, the Food and Health Bureau commissioned in mid-2015 a consultancy study to advise on the way forward for the live poultry trade in Hong Kong, including whether to maintain the sale of live poultry, taking into account the current situation of the trade, consumption preference of the public for live poultry, experience in comparable places, views of stakeholders and possible mutation of AI viruses.

Key findings of the consultancy study

4. Upon completing the study, the consultant is of the view that the AI measures currently adopted in Hong Kong are generally among the most comprehensive and stringent in the world and are effective in preventing human infection of AI. This is evidenced by the fact that there has been no locally infected human case of H5 or H7 AI virus after the first AI outbreak in Hong Kong in 1997. A survey conducted by the consultant has also revealed that a significant portion of members of the public prefers live poultry over other forms of poultry including freshly slaughtered, chilled and frozen ones and these people would be dissatisfied or very dissatisfied if live poultry cannot be bought in Hong Kong.

5. While views of experts on public health and animal health are divided, all the consulted experts support maintaining the local poultry rearing industry. The Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Disease of the Centre of Health Protection, however, recommends eventual cessation of the sale of live poultry at retail markets to control the risk of AI transmission to human. Local trade operators, including farmers, wholesalers, retailers and transporters, support maintaining the status quo of supplying both local and imported live poultry in Hong Kong, in order to preserve the local culinary culture and to minimize the impact on the trade. Some trade operators have even expressed a wish to see an expansion of live poultry trade in the future.

Recommendations of the consultancy study

6. The consultant recommends that the status quo be maintained, i.e. the sale of live poultry at the retail level should continue and the import of live poultry from the Mainland should not be banned. Alongside with maintaining the status quo of the live poultry trade, the consultant has proposed a number of bio-security and safeguarding improvement measures in the supply chain for enhancing the hygiene condition and the separation of human and live poultry as well as monitoring live poultry supply. The measures include:

- (a) introducing additional vaccination against H7N9 AI virus;
- (b) strengthening pre-sale AI test at local farms;
- (c) relocating the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market ("CSWTWPM") to a less populated area. A possible option is a site at Fu Tei Au in Sheung Shui;
- (d) setting a limit (e.g. three to four days) for keeping minor poultry (such as pheasants, chukars, silky chickens and pigeons)¹ in the wholesale market, plus compulsory emptying of poultry keeping cages for thorough cleansing; and
- (e) upgrading live poultry retail outlets to provide enhanced physical barriers between consumers and the live poultry, such as separate holding areas for storage and display of live poultry.

Members' views and concerns

7. At the meeting on 11 April 2017, the Panel was briefed on the findings and recommendations of the consultancy study. The Panel subsequently met with deputations on 16 May 2017 to receive public views on the consultant's recommendations. The major views and concerns expressed by members are summarized below.

Maintaining the local poultry industry

8. Members in general welcomed the consultant's recommendation of maintaining the status quo of the live poultry trade, which was considered important in preserving local culinary culture and minimizing the impact on the trade. Some members considered that the Administration should draw up short-, medium- and long-term plans conducive to the healthy and sustainable development of the local live poultry industry, e.g. increasing the numbers of local poultry farms and retail points so as to create business opportunities for the industry.

9. According to the consultant and the Administration, all the experts who had been consulted supported maintaining the local poultry rearing industry. Some experts agreed that the sale of live poultry at retail level could continue if

¹ Currently, unsold live chickens are allowed to stay for a maximum period of 24 hours after they have entered CSWTWPM. The "no overnight stocking" requirement is not applicable to minor poultry so that they can be transported in bulk to make shipment from the Mainland economically.

existing safeguarding measures were further enhanced. The live poultry retail outlets were the main contact points between the general public and live poultry. Although numerous safeguarding measures (including stringent hygiene code, regular inspection and sampling) had been applied in the retail outlets, it was recommended that the outlets be upgraded to enhance human and poultry separation by providing physical barriers. The proposed separation should be handled with flexibility and might be conducted in different degree, in view of various constraints confronted by different live poultry retail outlets such as their physical locations, scale of operation, a need for re-designing the market, etc. Dedicated study and layout design might be required for individual outlets to enhance separation. The physical barriers in the retail outlets were expected to further minimize the contact between the general public and potential viruses, hence reducing the risk of human infection of AI.

10. Some members raised concern about the increase in investment and operation costs to be incurred on/shouldered by trade operators arising from the further potential improvement measures. Although trade operators in general understood the rationale behind a stricter AI control system, due to the limited scale of the industry and the uncertainty of the future prospect of the live poultry trade, they lacked incentives to further invest in AI control measures to enhance their current operations. Some members were of the opinion that the Government should provide policy support and financial assistance along the live poultry supply chain to help trade operators to implement the enhanced AI control measures as suggested by the consultant.

11. According to the Administration, it had put in significant human and financial resources over the years to implement the existing AI control system without passing on the costs to the trade. Should the Administration decide to maintain live poultry trade in Hong Kong, it would conduct a comprehensive review of its overall policy direction on local live poultry industry. In the meantime, with a view to further reducing the risk of AI outbreak in Hong Kong, the Administration was actively working on the introduction of additional vaccination against H7N9 AI virus in local chicken farms and exploring the feasibility of importing fertile eggs in place of day-old chickens from the Mainland China.

Supply of both local and imported live poultry

12. Some members considered it not necessary to import live poultry from the Mainland if the Administration continued to promote in Hong Kong poultry rearing with a view to meeting the local demand for live poultry. In these members' view, it could help reduce the risk of AI outbreak in Hong Kong since there had not been AI outbreaks in recent years in local chicken farms despite occasional outbreaks in the Mainland. Some other members, however,

raised objection to this request. They pointed out that many Hong Kong people still preferred live poultry imported from the Mainland, due to the perceived better meat texture and taste, freshness as well as the competitive price. Therefore, importation of live poultry should be maintained.

13. According to the Administration, historically, about 70% of live poultry were imported and the rest were from local supply. Following AI incidents in imported live chickens in 2014, the relevant Mainland authorities had strengthened their safeguarding measures on registered farms. The supply of imported live chickens had been reduced. Since February 2016, there had not been live chickens imported from the Mainland notwithstanding that the Hong Kong Government had not imposed any ban against importation of live poultry from the Mainland. Since then, live chickens consumed in Hong Kong came mainly from local farms. The Mainland authorities had also suspended the supply of minor poultry since early 2017. The Administration further advised that according to the consultancy study, there was no concrete evidence showing that imported live poultry carried higher risk of AI than local live poultry. In reviewing past incidents of AI outbreaks in poultry, evidence showed that AI incidents happened on both local and imported live poultry.

Relocation of the wholesale market

14. There were different views over the consultant's recommendation that the live poultry wholesale market at Cheung Sha Wan be relocated to a less populated suburban area. Some members were concerned that CSWTWPM had been serving as a temporary facility for more than 40 years. Its close proximity to densely populated area had raised concerns of public health from nearby residents. In these members' view, the Government should expedite its work in relocating CSWTWPM. Some other members, however, expressed reservations about the proposal of relocating the wholesale market to Fu Tei Au, in view of its distance from the city centre and accessibility and hence, the possible impact on the trade and the live poultry supply chain.

15. According to the Administration, although existing measures could reduce the AI risk to a minimal extent, the risk could not be completely eliminated. Given that CSWTWPM was the largest holding place of live poultry in Hong Kong, relocating the wholesale market could reduce the potential risk of virus exposure to the public. In the worst case if the virus mutated and emerged with the ability to cause human-to-human transmission, the speed and scale of infection could be significantly reduced if it was situated in a more remote area. The Administration appreciated the operational problems faced by the trade and noted their aspiration that the location of the new wholesale market should be easily accessible. While a possible option considered by the consultant was a site at Fu Tei Au which was originally

earmarked for the purpose for establishing a centralized poultry slaughtering centre but was later put on reserve, the Administration would consult stakeholders including trade operators and the relevant District Councils, before deciding on the way forward.

Latest developments

16. According to the Administration, it generally agrees to the broad direction that the status quo of the live poultry trade should be maintained. The Administration has kicked start a two-month public consultation exercise on the way forward for the live poultry trade in Hong Kong. The public consultation exercise ended on 3 June 2017. The Administration will report on the results of the public consultation exercise at the Panel meeting on 13 June 2017.

Relevant papers

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

**Relevant papers on the outcome of the consultancy study
on the way forward for the live poultry trade in Hong Kong**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	11.4.2017 (Item VI)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Consultancy report</u>
	16.5.2017 (Item I)	<u>Agenda</u>

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