

ACFEH Information Paper 6

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

Progress of Comprehensive Plan of Action to Deal with the Global Problem of Avian Influenza

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the progress of implementing a comprehensive plan to deal with the problem of avian influenza in Hong Kong.

BACKGROUND

2. Since 1998, the Administration has progressively put in place preventive and surveillance measures to guard against the occurrence of avian influenza outbreaks. These included two rest days per month for the poultry wholesale and retail markets; enhanced bio-security measures in poultry farms; vaccination of local and imported chickens; setting back/separating poultry cages from customers in retail outlets and other preventive measures.

3. At the meeting held on 23 March 2005, Members discussed the paper on “Comprehensive Plan of Action to Deal with the Global Problem of Avian Influenza”. Since then, the Administration continued to deal with the problem by expanding the voluntary surrender scheme for retailers to cover live poultry farmers and wholesalers. Besides, we banned backyard poultry keeping in February 2006 in view of the public health risk brought about by such activity.

4. Though the existing comprehensive preventive and surveillance programme has hitherto proved to be effective in preventing the spread of avian influenza at the height of the outbreak in the entire region in the past two years, there is a need for us to address the problem

fundamentally given the recent developments. Since late 2003, 173 human cases of H5N1 infection, leading to 93 deaths, have been reported in seven countries, namely Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Iraq, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam. The infection in birds has recently entrenched its territory from Southeast Asia and spread rapidly to some 13 countries (including Iraq, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Iran, Austria, Germany, Egypt, India and France) in February 2006. In Hong Kong, we have also found H5N1 virus in 16 dead wild birds since October 2005. They included migratory birds, resident birds and backyard poultry. Most recently, in the light of the notification received by the Department of Health on a confirmed case of human infection of H5N1 avian influenza virus in Guangzhou, we had discussed with the Mainland authorities and temporarily suspended the supply of live poultry and birds from Guangdong for three weeks. Upon confirmation that the then public health situation is normal, we will decide to resume the supply of live poultry and birds to Hong Kong.

5. For human health, experience elsewhere over the past two years has shown that the greatest risk of cases arises when the virus becomes established in small backyard flocks, which allow continuing opportunities for close human contact, exposures and infections to occur. According to a recent report from the World Health Organisation, almost all human cases have been linked to close contact to diseased household flocks, often during slaughtering, defeathering, butchering and preparation of poultry for consumption.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION TO REDUCE THE RISK OF AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAK

Reducing the Live Poultry Population in Hong Kong

6. To reduce the risk of an epidemic outbreak through close contact between humans and a large number of live poultry and ensure that culling operation could be completed within the shortest possible time in case of an outbreak, we need to reduce the total live chicken population in Hong Kong. The target remains to control the maximum licensing capacity in local chicken farms at 2 million. Apart from having

introduced a voluntary surrender scheme to attract chicken farmers to cease their farm operations permanently in return for ex-gratia payment, the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation is considering to exercise as necessary her power under section 4 of the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Licensing of Livestock Keeping) Regulation (Cap. 139L) to slash the licensing capacity of remaining chicken farms in order to achieve the target on public health ground.

Reducing the Number of Live Poultry Farmers, Wholesalers and Retail Outlets

7. To reduce the number of live poultry farms and wholesale and retail stalls towards the desired target, we have since July 2004 and August 2005 introduced voluntary surrender schemes for live poultry retailers as well as farmers and wholesalers respectively. As at 28 February 2006, 71 farmers (including 34 chicken farmers), 12 wholesalers and one transporter have applied to cease their live poultry operations under the scheme. The maximum licensing capacity in local chicken farms will decrease by about 590,000 birds upon cessation of operation of the farms concerned. At the retail end, 272 retailers have surrendered their licences/tenancies, representing a decrease of 33% in the total number of retailers.

Implementing Segregation of Humans from Live Poultry

8. All along, our ultimate policy objective has been to achieve complete segregation of humans from live poultry. To this end, we have tried out short-term and medium-term measures to reduce contact between live poultry and customers at the retail level. For example, since April 2004, we have set down a requirement requiring live poultry retailers to set back poultry cages one metre from public passages or poultry cages have to be segregated from customers by acrylic panels.

9. We have also attempted to re-design the configuration of poultry stalls in some existing markets, e.g. Yue Wan Market and San Hui Market and a new market in Tai Kok Tsui so as to segregate live poultry storage/display area completely from customers with full height glass

panels. Although the proposed design has achieved the purpose of improving the trading environment within the market, such proposal could not be applied to all FEHD wet markets and fresh provision shops currently situated in private buildings and wet markets in public housing estates due to design and space constraints. Furthermore, the way live poultry are transported from the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market to retail stalls all over the territory could not entirely prevent feathers and poultry excreta from contaminating the environment.

10. As a practical means to address the avian influenza problem, we have been actively exploring the development of a poultry slaughtering plant in Hong Kong to put together poultry slaughtering activities. This would help achieve our policy objective of separating live poultry from humans as a means to prevent human infection from the disease. This would entail a fundamental change in the way the live poultry business operates in Hong Kong as there would be a complete stoppage of the sale of live poultry at the retail markets. As for chicken farms, we do not envisage any change to their operation at this stage, except that their chickens will have to be slaughtered at the slaughtering plant. At the meeting held in March 2005, Members were informed that we had identified the Western Wholesale Food Market (WWFM) as a potential site for developing the plant as the WWFM had once been the slaughtering venue for live ducks and geese and some basic infrastructure is readily available there. We consulted the Central and Western District Council twice in 2005 on the proposed use of the WWFM. Separately, with the assistance of the Efficiency Unit, we also completed in 2005 a consultancy study on the commercial viability for private sector involvement in developing the plant.

11. We consider that if the plant is to be located in the urban area, the surrounding environment would inevitably be affected. Moreover, the long transportation route of live poultry will not only cause possible nuisance to the urban area but also increase the risk of avian influenza. As a result, we find that it would be more appropriate to identify a site in the New Territories, which is relatively separated from major residential areas and closer to poultry farms in Mainland and Hong Kong, to develop the plant. Currently, we are searching for a suitable site for the purpose.

12. It remains our intention to have the plant developed and operated by the private sector since poultry slaughtering business is essentially a commercial activity. As and when we have identified a suitable site for the purpose, we would be able to set out the details of the scheme.

13. The development of a slaughtering plant will require legislative amendments to ban the retail sale of live poultry, to put in place a licensing regime for the slaughtering plant and to require poultry traders to deliver both local and imported live poultry to the slaughtering plant direct without passing through the existing wholesale poultry market. Support from the Legislative Council is thus necessary.

14. Given the preparatory work involved for the project, including environmental impact assessment which is a statutory requirement and normally takes close to a year to complete, possible amendment to the relevant Outline Zoning Plan for change of land use of the site ultimately selected for the development of the plant, public consultation, legislative amendment, invitation for expressions of interest by the private sector, tendering, evaluation of bids, contract negotiation, design and construction, we expect that the plant could only come into operation in 2009 the earliest.

15. While there is public support to develop a poultry slaughtering plant in view of the growing risk arising from the outbreak of avian influenza in different parts of the world recently, in particular in densely-populated cities, some people in Hong Kong still prefer freshly slaughtered chickens to chilled chickens. The poultry trade also objects strongly to the proposal which will affect the employment opportunities of poultry trade workers. Our assessment indicates that the development of the poultry slaughtering plant would affect about 3,000 operators and workers in the live poultry trade. However, as some of the live poultry retail stalls may switch to sell chilled and/or frozen poultry after the ban, the impact on these workers will be alleviated to a certain extent.

16. As regards the attractiveness of wet markets to shoppers, we do not expect that it would be significantly undermined as a consequence of unavailability of live poultry stalls. According to the findings of a

survey on shopping habits conducted in 2005, the main reasons for people shopping in markets are freshness of the food, varieties of the food, cheaper prices and convenient location. For as long as these pulling factors remain by and large unchanged, the impact on the business of the market stalls should not be affected.

Compulsory Termination of the Live Poultry Trade in the Event of an Outbreak of Avian Influenza in Hong Kong

17. The above planning aside, should there be evidence indicating that the existing control measures to prevent avian influenza have become ineffective, for example, having two or more cases of avian influenza outbreaks at local poultry farms or retail markets within a short period of time, we will take decisive action to cull all live poultry in Hong Kong immediately in an attempt to minimise the risk of spreading the disease. The affected live poultry operators would receive the standard statutory compensation for the live poultry culled in such an outbreak situation. A compulsory termination scheme will be introduced for all existing live poultry farmers, wholesalers and retailers following the culling.

ADVICE SOUGHT

18. Members are invited to note the progress of implementing the comprehensive plan to deal with the avian influenza problem, in particular that related to the reduction of local poultry population to 2 million and development of a poultry slaughtering plant.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
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