

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

Preparing for the Peak Season of Avian Influenza Outbreak

Introduction

This paper briefs Members on the Administration's preparation for the upcoming peak season of avian influenza outbreak.

Background

2. The peak season of avian influenza outbreak in the South China region will soon commence. According to experience, large number of migrating waterfowls, which are natural carriers of avian influenza virus, will arrive Hong Kong and stay in the coming months, thereby increasing the risk of avian influenza outbreak.

3. Learning from past outbreaks, Hong Kong has put in place a comprehensive avian influenza preventive and surveillance programme. So far, the programme has been effective in maintaining our commercial poultry avian influenza free despite the outbreaks in the region since 2004. The World Health Organisation (WHO) commented in 2004 that our preventive and surveillance programme is one of the most advanced systems that they have seen. In addition, the Lancet, an authoritative medical journal, also noted that Hong Kong's Preparedness Plan compared favourably with that of European countries.

4. To prepare for the coming winter, the Administration has taken a multi-pronged approach and consolidated departmental efforts to prevent avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong. The measures taken at different aspects are set out below.

Poultry Farms

5. We have imposed stringent biosecurity measures to prevent the introduction of avian influenza viruses to local farms. These include the requirement that all farms should be bird-proof to prevent the spreading of viruses by wild birds; vaccination of all poultry, restricting entry of

equipment and vehicles into farms unless properly disinfected, etc. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) also conducts virus culture of faecal samples collected from farms regularly and tests every batch of chickens on farm within 7 days of marketing.

6. We introduced a voluntary surrender scheme (VSS) for live poultry farmers, wholesalers, retailers and transporters who choose to receive an ex-gratia payment (EGP) in exchange for their licences/tenancies. Upon the expiry of the VSS in August this year, we received 146 applications from farmers, representing a reduction of local on-farm poultry population from about 3.7 million to 1.7 million. Since February this year, we have banned the keeping of unlicensed backyard poultry in Hong Kong. With less poultry farms in Hong Kong, AFCD will dedicate more efforts to monitoring the remaining farms in accordance with the existing stringent measures. Regular inspections will also be conducted at vacated farms to guard against restarting of business without a licence.

Import Control

7. We have imposed tightened requirement for the importation of live poultry or poultry products. For instance, all imported live chickens must be attested with a valid health certificate certifying, among other things, that the birds in the consignment come from registered farms and are properly vaccinated. We will continue to pay regular inspection visits to registered poultry farms in the Mainland to ensure that biosecurity measures are fully implemented. At the point of importation, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) will continue to inspect the birds and collect blood samples or cloacal swabs for testing.

Wholesale and Retail Markets

8. The Administration has also imposed stringent hygiene requirements for wholesale and retail markets. Examples include 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, etc. We will also continue to strictly implement the requirement of market “Rest Days” imposed once every month to break any virus cycle in the market.

9. Under the VSS mentioned in paragraph 6, the number of live poultry wholesalers has also been reduced from 86 to 70, and from 814 to 466 for retailers. AFCD and FEHD will continue to closely monitor the remaining wholesaling and retailing outlets to ensure that stringent hygiene

requirements are complied with.

Surveillance

10. Apart from the preventive measures, we have also put in place a comprehensive surveillance programme which enables us to monitor human influenza activity and detect the presence of avian influenza viruses in our environment. On human influenza surveillance, our system enables us to monitor the disease trend and circulating influenza viruses. This programme covers a network of clinics, hospitals and laboratories in the public and private sectors. On avian influenza surveillance, we started a comprehensive programme targeted at poultry at all levels including farms, the import level, wholesale market and retail outlets. To ensure timely detection of the presence of any avian influenza viruses in our environment and the possible reassortment of the viruses, we have also extended the programme to wild birds, waterfowls in recreational parks and pet birds available for sale in the market.

11. In 2005, we tested over 100 samples from wholesale market, 200 samples from pet bird shops and 300 samples from imported pet birds per month, and collecting over 4200 faecal samples from wild bird aggregating places. As for imported live poultry, they are subject to serological monitoring of vaccine effectiveness as well as PCR testing for H5 antigen. More than 20000 swabs taken from more than 120000 live poultry have been taken for PCR tests since 2004 and all were found negative for H5 antigen .

12. Since October 2005, the public can contact AFCD via the Government hotline for door-to-door collection of dead birds. As at September 2006, about 11000 dead or sick wild birds have been collected and tested by AFCD of which 17 samples were confirmed to contain avian influenza viruses. AFCD has also promulgated guidelines for the closure of Mai Po Nature Reserve, Hong Kong Wetland Park and other walk-in aviaries if a bird is found to be infected by avian influenza viruses within a 3-kilometre radius of these sites.

International Liaison and Communication with the Mainland

13. As avian influenza is a global problem, our public health authority maintains close contacts with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and health authorities in other parts of the world. We will also continue to maintain a close liaison with the Mainland authorities. Hong Kong signed a Cooperation Agreement on Response Mechanism for Public Health

Emergencies with the Mainland Ministry of Health and Macao in October 2005. In cases of cross-boundary public health emergencies, the three places may form a joint emergency response group to facilitate sharing of intelligence and expertise, and hence ensure a prompt response against infectious disease outbreaks. The Department of Health (DH) also regularly meets our health counterparts in Guangdong and Macao. We also signed a notification agreement with the Mainland Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) on animal diseases, including avian influenza. MoA will notify us of outbreaks of AI among poultry and other major animal diseases. Since mid 2005, the MoA has issued us over 40 such notifications.

Public Education and Promotion

14. To remind the public of the approaching peak season of avian influenza outbreak and the importance of maintaining personal hygiene, the Administration will step up promotion activities and public education programmes. For example, AFCD, FEHD and DH will organize two joint briefings for all District Councils in November 2006 with a view to educating the public in a holistic manner, covering personal hygiene, biosecurity measures applied to local poultry farms and wholesale market, disease surveillance on imported birds/ pet birds /wild birds, handling of dead birds and hygiene requirement in retail markets. In addition, we will increase the number of Announcement of Public Interest broadcast on TV and radio, displaying posters, etc. to keep public vigilance to the threat of avian influenza.

Investment in Public Health System

15. In the past few years, the Hong Kong Government incurred/ earmarked more than \$4.5 billion to enhance our preparedness against emerging infectious diseases including avian influenza. Some of the major investments include the provision of an infectious disease block and isolation beds, setting up a Centre for Health Protection, antiviral stockpiling, and purchase of personal protective equipment and medical equipment. Temperature checks for in-bound travellers at all control points have been reactivated since late 2005.

Preparedness Plan

16. To prepare for possible outbreaks of avian influenza, the Administration has devised a comprehensive preparedness plan to ensure prompt and effective actions to protect public health. The preparedness plan includes a three-level response system (Alert Response Level, Serious

Response Level and Emergency Response Level). These levels are based on different risk-graded epidemiological scenarios relevant to Hong Kong, and each of them prescribes a given set of public health actions required. They are designed to match with the WHO's guideline for pandemic influenza planning.

Poultry Slaughtering Plant

17. To further reduce the risk of human infection of avian influenza so as to achieve the policy objective of separating humans from poultry, the government has decided to develop a poultry slaughtering and processing plant at Man Kam To Road, Sheung Shui to put together slaughtering activities. With an area of about 15 000 m², the site is currently used as a public carpark and vehicle-repairing depot on short-term tenancies. The site has the advantage of being close to the border and distant from major residential areas. The slaughtering plant will operate throughout the year with a maximum daily slaughtering capacity of 60 000 live chickens and 3 000 pigeons and other small poultry. Upon the completion of the plant, live poultry from the Mainland and local farms will be brought to the plant direct without routing through wholesale poultry market. Sale of live poultry in retail outlets will be prohibited.

18. The plant will be developed by the private sector selected through open tender under a Build, Own, Operate and Transfer (BOOT) arrangement. To avoid any monopolistic situation, the plant operator will be required to reserve sufficient capacity for the slaughter of chickens produced by local poultry farms and to provide poultry slaughtering services for importers of poultry from the Mainland on request.

19. We will conduct an Invitation for Expression of Interest exercise shortly to ascertain market interest and to collate the views of prospective operators on the operational and commercial arrangements for the project. We will invite tender next year and we expect the plant could come into operation in 2009/2010.

20. We will introduce legislation next year to put in place a licensing regime to regulate the management/operation of the plant, and to set out the general requirements including hygiene requirement for the licensed poultry slaughtering plant.

Conclusion

21. The widespread occurrence of avian influenza outbreaks in Asia and Europe in the past years indicated that the threat of avian influenza was persisting. Hong Kong must maintain our vigilance on this matter. In view of the possible mutation of the avian influenza viruses, the Government will continue to work with the academia, trade and general public in its efforts to better protect public health.

Advise Sought

22. Members are invited to note the preventive measures set out in the paper.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
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