

International Business Committee

Avian flu incident in December 2008

PURPOSE

This paper briefs the International Business Committee on the actions taken by the Administration subsequent to the detection of H5N1 virus in dead chickens of a local farm to arrest the possible spread of the avian influenza virus.

BACKGROUND

2. On 8 December 2008, a local chicken farmer of a farm¹ located at Ha Tsuen near Lau Fau Shan, Yuen Long (the index farm) reported abnormal death of some 60 chickens to the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). In response to the report, a team of AFCD staff immediately conducted inspection at the farm and found that another 60 chickens from two batches in the chicken shed nearby were also dying. Three chicken carcasses and 120 chicken faecal samples were collected from the farm concerned for testing of avian flu virus. These samples were subsequently found positive of avian flu on 9 December 2008.

3. In view of the situation, the Secretary for Food and Health (SFH) immediately convened an inter-departmental steering meeting on 9 December 2008. Upon the advice of the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DAFC), SFH raised the response level on avian flu from Alert Response Level to Serious Response Level on the same day. The meeting also decided to take a series of actions at the Serious Response Level according to the contingency plan to prevent the spread of the virus.

ACTIONS TAKEN

4. To prevent the possible spread of the virus, we have taken a series of measures on various fronts including farms, wholesale market and retail outlets as follows –

¹ The licensing capacity of the index farm is 102 000 chickens and its actual rearing capacity as of 8 December 2008 was around 68 000 chickens.

Culling of poultry

- (i) All live poultry (around 68 000 chickens) in the index farm were culled and destroyed. In accordance with international guidelines, live poultry within three-kilometre radius of the index farm are recommended to be culled to prevent the spread of virus. Hence, all live poultry (around 18 000 chickens) in another chicken farm were also culled and destroyed.
- (ii) As some chickens from the other farm within three-kilometre radius of the index farm were found in the wholesale market on 9 December 2008, as a precautionary measure, all live poultry including around 10 000 chickens and 7 000 minor poultry in the wholesale market were culled and destroyed.

Suspension of local and imported live poultry supply

- (iii) All local farms stopped dispatching live poultry to the wholesale market starting from 9 December 2008. Importation of live poultry and birds were also suspended from noon of 9 December.

Testing of live poultry in other local farms

- (iv) During the suspension period of local chicken supply, inspection and intensive testing of live poultry in all remaining local farms has been conducted.

Stepping up surveillance on live poultry and birds

- (v) Surveillance and sample testing on birds in the Yuen Po Street Bird Garden has been stepped up. The Ocean Park, the World Wild Fund Hong Kong and the Leisure and Cultural Service Department were requested to step up their biosecurity measures against avian flu in their venues or parks. As the Hong Kong Wetland Park and the Yuen Long Aviary Pagoda are located within the three-kilometre radius of the index farm, the Pagoda and also the outdoor section of the Wetland Park were closed for 21 days starting from 9 December.

Disinfection of wholesale market and retail outlets

- (vi) All live poultry retail outlets were inspected on 9 December to ensure that live poultry were slaughtered by 8 pm that day in compliance with the law.
- (vii) The wholesale market and all live poultry retail outlets were thoroughly cleansed and disinfected.

Distribution of Tamiflu and enhanced surveillance of human infection

- (viii) Tamiflu was offered to persons with possible direct exposure to infected poultry (including persons living/working on the two local farms concerned). The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) has put the exposed poultry farmers and workers from the two farms concerned under medical surveillance for 14 days. Six workers who had direct contact with the dead chickens were admitted to the Hospital Authority Infectious Disease Centre at Princess Margaret Hospital for observation for the first 7 days.
- (ix) Hospitals and private medical practitioners were reminded to report any suspected cases to the CHP. The CHP has also set up a hotline (2125 1122) manned by healthcare staff to answer enquiries from the public.

SETTING UP OF INVESTIGATION GROUPS

5. At the moment, there is no scientific evidence showing that the virus has mutated. There is also no sign of any human to human transmission. Nevertheless, to better prepare ourselves against the risks of any possible avian flu in the future, we have set up two investigation groups consisting of representatives from various departments and external professionals on 12 December. These two groups are responsible for conducting epidemiological study of avian flu outbreak on the index farm and the vaccine study respectively.

6. The investigation group on epidemiological study will do an in-depth examination of the biosecurity measures of the index farm and try to identify the source of infection as well as the channel that the virus could have got into the farm. Besides, the group will review and revise the guidelines on biosecurity measures of farms so as to assist the farmers in better protecting the safety of the chickens.

7. On the other hand, the investigation group on vaccine study will be responsible for conducting research and tests on the efficacy of the existing H5N2 vaccine used in Hong Kong. The group will also study the effectiveness and quality of alternative vaccines. The information gathered and the group's recommendations will facilitate the Administration in the choice of vaccine most suitable for Hong Kong's circumstances.

8. It is expected that the investigation group on epidemiological study will complete a preliminary report in two to three weeks time from the date of formation and submit a full report in two months. For the investigation group on vaccine study, it is expected that a preliminary report will be submitted in two to three months time and a full report as early as possible within a year.

RESUMPTION OF LIVE POULTRY SUPPLY ON 30 DECEMBER

9. Since the detection of avian flu in the index farm, AFCD staff has conducted several rounds of inspections on all local chicken farms to follow up their bio-security measures and collect samples for testing with a view to ascertaining whether sale of live poultry could be resumed. A total of three rounds of testing were carried out and the test results were all negative.

10. Given the negative test results and after assessing the hygienic condition of the local farms, AFCD considered that the sale of live poultry at retail outlets could be resumed on 30 December after a 21-day ban from 9 December. In coming up with this decision, AFCD has also consulted the investigation group responsible for studying the avian flu incident and taken into account the international guidelines. Thorough cleansing and disinfection were conducted again at the wholesale market and all live poultry retail outlets before the resumption of live poultry sale.

11. The modification works on the live poultry stocking areas at the wholesale market have also been recently completed to step up the bio-security measures at the wholesale market. Wholesalers are required to keep all live chickens to be stocked overnight at designated stocking areas. As in the past, all the chickens stocked in these areas must be sold and be delivered out of the wholesale market no later than 7 am on the following day. After all the chickens are cleared, the stocking areas

will be thoroughly cleansed and disinfected daily before the new batch of poultry to be stocked would be admitted into the areas.

12. Whilst the other local farms were allowed to despatch live chickens to the wholesale market following the resumption of sale of live poultry, the index farm is still being banned from transferring live chickens in or out the farm. The ban lasts for at least 90 days starting from 9 December. Before the index farm could be reopened, AFCD veterinary officers would have to conduct inspections and be satisfied with the farm's disinfection and cleansing condition. The index farm would also need to enhance its bio-security measures as well as pass the tests on avian flu.

ADVICE SOUGHT

13. Members are invited to note the actions taken by the Administration in response to the avian flu incident in December 2008.

Food and Health Bureau
December 2008