

LCQ1: Supply of live poultry

Following is a question by the Hon Tommy Cheung and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (November 29):

Question:

Some members of the catering industry have relayed that the pace of recovery of the business of the catering industry has been slow after the epidemic, and Cantonese cuisine in local restaurants has lost much of its lustre as fresh poultry cannot be used as an ingredient. They are of the view that as the risk posed by the avian influenza to Hong Kong has been relatively reduced, the Government must increase the choices of fresh food ingredients available in the market to enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong as a "culinary capital". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will consider allowing local farms to keep poultry such as ducks, geese and pigeons on an appropriate scale, so as to resume the supply of such live poultry;

(2) given that Hong Kong has ceased importing certain types of live poultry from the Mainland for a number of years, whether the Government will consider discussing with the relevant Mainland departments so that the supply of an appropriate amount of live poultry such as ducks, geese and pigeons to Hong Kong will be allowed; and

(3) whether it will consider supplying live poultry to restaurants under specific control measures, so that traditional dishes prepared with the use of live poultry can continue to be promoted and preserved; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Upon consulting the Health Bureau, our consolidated reply to the question is as follows:

According to information from the World Health Organization (WHO), the mortality rate of human cases infected with avian influenza A (H5N1) over the past 20 years has exceeded 50 per cent. WHO experts believe that the current avian influenza epidemic poses a continuing risk to humans.

For Hong Kong, since the first human case of avian influenza was detected locally in 1997, Hong Kong experienced seven outbreaks of poultry infected with avian influenza A of H5 or H7 subtypes. Human infection of avian influenza was detected in the 1997 outbreak in which 18 developed the disease, of whom six died. Between 2004 and October 2023, the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health recorded a total of 29 cases

(including five deaths) of humans infected with avian influenza. Epidemiological investigations reflected that the source of the risk for avian influenza infection in humans in Hong Kong is from the contact with infected live poultry or its related environment. To safeguard public health, the government has implemented a series of measures at various levels of the live poultry supply chain, to reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreaks. Thus far, the risk of avian influenza in Hong Kong is under control.

(1) Chickens in all local farms in Hong Kong are currently required to receive mandatory vaccination against H5 and H7 avian influenza, and the government has been constantly updating suitable vaccines, to ensure sufficient protection for chickens on farms. Ducks and geese, which are waterfowl, are natural reservoirs of avian influenza viruses. Previous studies showed that live ducks could persistently shed virus even after being vaccinated against avian influenza. Hence, it may not be reliable to use vaccination for the prevention of avian influenza infection in waterfowl. Moreover, while chickens would show significant clinical signs, or even die, after being infected with avian influenza A, waterfowl could be asymptomatic and shed virus for a long time after infection. Since waterfowl mainly sheds virus via the fecal route after being infected with avian influenza, the organic matters inside the fecal samples could affect the results of the rapid test leading to false negative results. Furthermore, different from chickens which could be reared under a well-controlled environment, the rearing of waterfowl generally requires a period of free-ranging outdoors such as outdoor space or pond. Thus, the transmission risk of avian influenza from infected waterfowl to other poultry and humans is much higher than that of chickens.

International experts on avian influenza have also pointed out, that waterfowl could serve as a mixing vessel for different strains of avian influenza viruses. If waterfowl is simultaneously infected with different strains of avian influenza viruses, the viruses can undergo genetic re-assortment within their bodies, leading to mutation of avian influenza viruses. If the avian influenza virus undergoes genetic mutations, it may reduce the effectiveness of the current mandatory vaccination of chickens against avian influenza, thereby increasing the risk of avian influenza outbreaks in local chicken farms and posing a threat to human health. In view of the above considerations, the government has no plans to allow waterfowl rearing at local farms at this stage.

Regarding rearing of pigeons, pigeons are not waterfowl. In response to the avian influenza epidemic at that time, the industry requested for the surrendering of Livestock Keeping Licences to reduce the risk of avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong. The government introduced various voluntary surrender or buyout schemes from 2005 to 2008 for livestock farmers who chose to cease operation voluntarily. Poultry farmers who chose to return their Livestock Keeping Licences received ex-gratia payment. At the time, all pigeon farms in Hong Kong voluntarily returned their licences and ceased operations permanently. Following implementation of these schemes, to reduce the risk of avian influenza transmission, the government has ceased issuing new Livestock Keeping Licences for keeping poultry (including pigeons).

(2) In order to prevent the transmission of avian influenza viruses from waterfowl to chickens, the government the Government has adopted the policy of segregation of chickens from waterfowl at all levels from import to retail since 1998. Legislations were enacted to mandate that live waterfowl must be processed by central slaughtering and prohibit the sale of live waterfowl at retail outlets.

Since 2004, due to the avian influenza situation, live ducks and geese have not been imported from the Mainland to Hong Kong. Given the persistent risk of avian influenza, we have no plans to raise the request with the Mainland authorities, for resuming exports of waterfowl to Hong Kong.

As for other live poultry, including live chickens and minor poultry such as pigeons, there is no ban in Hong Kong on live poultry imports from the Mainland, and the government has been adopting an open mind. Since early 2017, there has been no supply of live poultry to Hong Kong from the Mainland. The Hong Kong SAR government has been maintaining close communication with relevant Mainland authorities regarding different issues of food supply (including live poultry) from the Mainland. We believe the Mainland registered farms supplying live poultry to Hong Kong no longer supplied to Hong Kong mainly based on commercial considerations.

(3) To our understanding, some local restaurants currently purchase local freshly slaughtered chicken from live poultry retailers for cooking. In order to provide more retail outlets for meeting the public demand, we recently conducted risk assessment and considered that the existing biosecurity measures could effectively control the risk of avian influenza associated with live chickens. Therefore, on the basis that prevention of avian influenza transmission will not be compromised, we plan to introduce an appropriate number of live poultry stalls in new public markets or modernised markets that are completely refurbished or redeveloped, as far as circumstances allow. For example, the new public market to be constructed in Area 67 of Tseung Kwan O will have two live poultry stalls. The new live poultry stalls will adopt designs with stringent hygiene standards and a display window for sale purposes. These stalls will have dedicated slaughtering rooms inside, ensuring complete separation between purchasers and the live poultry. In addition, these stalls will be equipped with independent air conditioning, ventilation and air filtration systems to ensure good hygiene conditions.

In summary, our current containment of avian influenza risk in Hong Kong depends on the implementation of various preventive and control measures across different levels over the years and this achievement did not come by easily. The Hong Kong SAR government will continue to closely monitor outbreaks of avian influenza in neighboring areas, continuously assess the transmission risk of avian influenza and strictly implement various preventive and control measures, while making adjustments as appropriate to safeguard public health.

Thank you, President.