

LCQ14: Measures to alleviate the impacts of African Swine Fever

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (November 20):

Question:

African Swine Fever (ASF) broke out on the Mainland in August last year and quickly swept through most parts of the Mainland. Fortunately, it has not spread to the pig farms in Hong Kong. Due to the epidemic, quite a number of registered pig farms on the Mainland for supply to Hong Kong (registered pig farms) have ceased to supply live pigs to Hong Kong, resulting in a substantial decrease in the daily number of live pigs imported from the Mainland from 4 000 heads in the past to below 1 700 heads at present. The wholesale and retail prices of pork have consequently surged and, as a result, the relevant trades and members of the public have been greatly affected. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the changes in the national monthly figures on (i) the pig rearing capacity, (ii) the quantity of feed consumed and (iii) the number of pig farms, since August last year; if such information is not available, whether it will expeditiously seek such information from the relevant Mainland authorities;

(2) of (i) the number of Mainland-registered pig farms, the change in that number and the up-to-date list of the farms, in each quarter, and (ii) the monthly average retail price of local fresh pork, since August last year; if such information is not available, whether it will compile the statistics expeditiously;

(3) given that the relief measures introduced recently by the Government (including reducing rental for stalls in public markets and waiving the licence fees for fresh provision shops, slaughterhouses and pig farms) are only short-term in nature, whether the Government will make reference to the practice of the Central Government and introduce more proactive measures to promote live pig production and safeguard market supply, including (i) providing support in the form of subsidies and subsidised interest for loans, (ii) exploring the provision of additional sites for pig rearing and offering loans to pig farm licensees in order to increase the pig rearing capacity, and (iii) providing the live pig-related trades with targeted subsidies for stabilising live pig production, so as to alleviate the problem of rising pig prices and promote the development of the local pig rearing industry in the long run;

(4) as the authorities have indicated that they will explore using the unused licensed rearing capacity of local pig farms (about 11 000 heads) to increase

live pig rearing capacity, but there are only a few pig farms which have unused capacity and the licensees concerned may not be willing to increase their rearing capacity, whether the Government will consider increasing the licensed rearing capacity prescribed under various licences, so as to increase pig rearing capacity more effectively and comprehensively;

(5) as the authorities have undertaken to enhance comprehensively the quarantine and disinfection work covering the various aspects of the transportation chain for live pigs (including converting pig-carrying trucks to half-sealing and considering the installation of additional disinfection facilities at slaughterhouses for vehicles entering and leaving the slaughterhouses), and to provide a timetable of the relevant work, of the progress and timetable of such work;

(6) given that although pork supply is still tight on the Mainland at present, the quantity of live pigs supplied to Hong Kong in the past (about 4 000 heads per day) actually accounted for only a tiny proportion of the pig rearing capacity of the whole nation (about hundreds of millions of heads), and that the authorities have also indicated that they will discuss with the relevant Mainland authorities and try their best to bring the supply of live pigs to Hong Kong back to its previous level, of the progress and details of such work;

(7) as the authorities have indicated that they will consider importing live pigs from overseas, of the progress and details of such work;

(8) of (i) the total quantity of import of chilled and frozen pork, (ii) the top 10 regions that supplied the largest quantities of chilled and frozen pork to Hong Kong, (iii) the changes in the number of fresh provision shops eligible for selling chilled and frozen pork, and (iv) the number of cases uncovered by the authorities of such shops selling chilled and frozen pork disguised as fresh pork, in the past three years; and

(9) as it has been reported that some countries and regions have ceased to import chilled and frozen pork from the infected areas in order to prevent the spread of ASF, whether Hong Kong currently imports chilled and frozen pork from the infected areas; if so, of the details, and why the Government does not suspend all import of pork from those areas?

Reply:

President,

(1) and (2) Since the first African Swine Fever (ASF) case was found on the Mainland, the HKSAR Government has been closely monitoring the development in ASF outbreak as well as the supply of live pigs to Hong Kong and their price. The quarterly figures of registered Mainland pig farms supplying live pigs to Hong Kong (registered pig farms) since the third quarter of 2018 are set out in the following table:

Quarter	Number of registered pig farms	Number increased	Number decreased
		(Compared with the previous quarter)	
3rd quarter of 2018	187		
4th quarter of 2018	154	4	37
1st quarter of 2019	154	2	2
2nd quarter of 2019	144	1	11
3rd quarter of 2019	127	0	17

The list of registered pig farms is subject to change, as determined by factors such as commercial considerations and the rearing conditions of the registered farms. The latest list is available on the official website of the General Administration of Customs.

The Central Government established a website (www.gov.cn/shuju/shengzhu/xinxi.htm) to publish figures related to live pigs on the Mainland, such as number of pigs slaughtered, number of pigs stocked at farm and price.

As to the retail price of fresh pork in Hong Kong, the Monthly Report on the Consumer Price Index published by the Census and Statistics Department reported the average retail price of "fresh pork lean meat" from August 2018 to September 2019 as follows:

	Month	Average retail price (\$HK/kilogram)
2018	August	72.1
	September	72.8
	October	73.2
	November	74.0
	December	74.8

2019	January	75.7
	February	80.5
	March	78.3
	April	76.5
	May	85.5
	June	137.3
	July	142.6
	August	156.4
	September	159.0

(3) and (4) The Government has been implementing various support measures to facilitate the development of the local pig rearing industry. The Government established the "Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund" (SADF) in 2016 to foster the sustainable development and enhance the overall competitiveness of the agricultural industry. In early 2019, the SADF allocated about \$15 million to support the Jockey Club College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences of the City University of Hong Kong for the provision of veterinary services (including disease diagnosis and treatment) to local pig farmers as well as the procurement of necessary vaccines and medications, and formulation of tailor-made disease prevention and management programmes for pig farms, with a view to improving pig productivity, enhancing food safety, and strengthening early warning and monitoring of diseases. In addition, the Hong Kong Productivity Council has received a grant of about \$5 million from the SADF and has commenced a demonstration project on advanced sewage treatment technologies in pig farms to enhance the sewage treatment technologies for local pig farms. A "Farm Improvement Scheme" has also been established under the SADF to provide direct grants of a maximum amount of \$30,000 to local pig farmers for the acquisition of small farming equipment and materials, such as feed mixers and disease preventive facilities, to enhance rearing techniques, productivity and biosecurity of pig farms.

Apart from SADF, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is also responsible for managing the Agricultural Aid Loan Fund, which offers a low-interest loan to farmers for farm development and working capital to resolve their financial difficulties. There is no financial limit for the agricultural loan and currently the amount of unsecured loan available is up to \$130,000. In order to provide targeted assistance for pig farms affected by ASF, a special loan scheme was set up under the J.E. Joseph Trust Fund in November 2018 to provide a low-interest unsecured loan up to \$800,000 with an annual interest rate of about 0.1 per cent, subject to the scale of farms. In addition, the Government announced the waiving of licence fee for pig farms for one year in August 2019.

The Government introduced a voluntary surrender scheme for pig farms and the ex-gratia payment scheme in 2006 to enable pig farmers to voluntarily cease operation. As a corollary, the Government decided to stop the issue of new licences and freeze the rearing capacity of those pig farms that chose not to join the voluntary surrender scheme that year in order to gradually reduce the public health and environmental pollution problems brought by the

pig rearing industry in Hong Kong. Currently, the Government does not have any plan to change the policy of limiting the number of pig farms and the total rearing capacity. There are now 43 licensed pig farms in Hong Kong with the total maximum rearing capacity being 74 640 heads. These farms are rearing about 61 000 heads of pigs in total.

Regarding the sites for pig rearing, if an existing licensed pig farm is affected by land development, the licensee may consider relocation. The relocation site must be within the livestock waste control area and comply with the Public Health (Animals and Birds)(Licensing of Livestock Keeping) Regulation (Cap. 139L) with regard to livestock keeping control, biosecurity, environmental protection, as well as the relevant legislations relating to planning and lands. On the premise that the public health as well as the disease prevention and control are not affected, the Government is open-minded to explore with the trade the relocation and consolidation of pig farms, provided that there would not be any increase in the maximum rearing capacity, and biosecurity of the farms would be enhanced to minimise the risk of pig infection.

(5) In the past year, the Government has enhanced the biosecurity of transportation of live pigs in collaboration with the trade. For slaughterhouses, Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (SSSH) and Tsuen Wan Slaughterhouse have stepped up cleansing and disinfection of incoming and outgoing pig conveying vehicles since August last year, and installed pressurised water pumps and high-pressure hot water guns to enhance cleansing efficiency. Since February this year, SSSH has also installed disinfection pools at the entrance and exit to thoroughly disinfect the wheels of the pig conveying vehicles. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the slaughterhouse operators have arranged additional manpower for monitoring to ensure that the vehicles have been thoroughly cleansed and disinfected before leaving.

In the long-term, the Government is exploring to establish a one-stop automatic facility in SSSH to provide quick and comprehensive cleansing and disinfection of live pig conveying vehicles. If the plan is feasible, the new facility is expected to come into operation within two to three years.

At local farms level, the AFCD has been enhancing promotion of preventive measures against ASF with a view to raising the trade's awareness on disease precautions and ensuring that proper biosecurity measures were implemented at pig farms. At the same time, the AFCD has been deploying staff to inspect local pig farms, and to request pig farmers to strictly control the vehicles and personnel entering pig farms and enhance the cleansing and disinfection of vehicles and personnel entering and leaving pig farms.

(6) and (7) The Government is highly concerned about the low level of live pig supply and the increase in price, and has been liaising closely with the Mainland authorities to reflect the desire of the trade and the public for increasing the supply. Nevertheless, the production and supply of live pigs on the Mainland have also been affected by the outbreak of ASF, leading to excess demand for live pigs for local consumption and the continuous increase

in price on the Mainland. These affected the supply of live pigs to Hong Kong. We will continue to maintain close liaison with the Mainland authorities on increasing supply of live pigs to Hong Kong.

In regards to the recent proposal from the trade on importing live pigs from other places (such as Thailand, South Korea and Malaysia) in order to increase the source of live pig's supply, the Government is willing to explore the feasibility with the trade and relevant stakeholders and to coordinate accordingly. Since September this year, the AFCD has been in contact with the relevant authorities or consulate generals in Hong Kong to express the import intentions of the local trade. Subsequently, the AFCD has been actively liaising with the relevant stakeholders and organising meetings to discuss the feasibility and the follow-up work required for importing live pigs from relevant countries. These include the control and prevention plan against ASF in the country and the farms to be provided by the exporting countries and the standard operating procedures and contingency plans to be prepared by the importers for further risk assessment by the AFCD. In addition, the AFCD plans to visit Singapore in December this year to learn about the local regulation of importing live pigs from Malaysia by sea.

However, as importation of live food animals entails public health and food safety considerations and the outbreaks of ASF in the neighboring countries are emerging, we have to exercise caution.

(8) According to the information provided by the Census and Statistics Department, a total of 29 800 tonnes of chilled pork and 726 700 tonnes of frozen pork were imported into Hong Kong between 2017 and 2019 (as at September). The top ten places of origin of imported chilled pork were the Mainland, Thailand, Spain, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, the United States (the US), Japan, the United Kingdom and France. As for imported frozen pork, the top ten places of origin were Brazil, the Mainland, the Netherlands, the US, Vietnam, Poland, Germany, Spain, Canada and Italy.

The number of fresh provision shop licence for sale of chilled and frozen pork has increased slightly this year, from 1 369 in 2017 and 2018 to 1 378 at the end of October this year. The FEHD has set a specific licensing condition to prohibit the sale of chilled meat as fresh meat. Any licensee who contravenes this licensing condition will have the fresh provision shop licence cancelled immediately without any prior warning. In the past three years, a fresh provision shop licence was cancelled due to the breach of the above mentioned licensing condition. In addition to regular inspections of licensed fresh provision shops, FEHD officers will also conduct thematic blitz operations and enforcement actions as necessary to enhance the monitoring of the licensed food premises in compliance with licensing conditions and laws and to ensure the hygiene condition of the premises.

(9) As we have pointed out many times, ASF is not a zoonotic disease and would not be transmitted to humans, hence posing no food safety risk to the public. Well-cooked pork and pork products are safe for consumption. However, as ASF can cause massive infection and death in pigs within a short period of time, the current strategy for the prevention and control of ASF in Hong Kong

mainly aims at preventing the virus from infecting local pig farms.

After the occurrence of two ASF cases in Hong Kong in May this year, preventative measures have been further strengthened. Among them, the Government has imposed a daily clearance arrangement, which means all live pigs will be slaughtered within 24 hours upon admittance into the slaughterhouses, having taken into account the views of local and overseas experts and with the support of the trade. Under the new arrangement, lairages in different areas of the slaughterhouses will be cleared out and undergo thorough cleansing and disinfection every day. Given the short stay of pigs in the slaughterhouses, which undergo thorough cleansing and disinfection daily, the risk of spreading ASF has been largely minimised.

In addition, the government departments concerned have implemented a number of measures in the past year to step up biosecurity in local pig farms, including banning the use of food waste as pig feed, and stepping up cleansing and disinfection of slaughterhouses and vehicles entering and leaving pig farms, as well as recommending pig farmers to ban staff from bringing pork and pork products into the farms. We believe that these measures are effective in reducing the possibility of ASF infection in local pig farms.