

LCQ18: Prevention of African Swine Fever

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (February 21):

Question:

According to the information from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, 10 African Swine Fever (ASF) cases have been detected one after another since November last year, and at least 17 457 live pigs have been culled in Hong Kong. There are views that live pigs from local pig farms have always been an important backup for live pigs supplied to Hong Kong as well as a source of quality branded fresh meat for Hong Kong people, and the spread of ASF will likely impact the sustainable development of the agriculture and fisheries industry in the long run. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of ASF cases detected in local pig farms and the cumulative number of pigs culled in each of the past five years;

(2) whether it has conducted an assessment on the relevant situation in the light of repeated detection of ASF cases in pig farms in Hong Kong; of the policy initiatives in place to help the industry prevent and cope with ASF, and to support pig farms in business resumption after ASF infection; whether it will expeditiously enhance the operation and development of modern pig farms with a view to preventing infection among pigs;

(3) as some pig farmers have relayed that as a preventive measure against ASF, the Government has tightened the licensing conditions of pig farms and even revoked the licence of non-compliant licensees of farms, some members of the industry hope that the Government can strengthen communication with them as regards the licensing conditions and specific details of preventive measures against infection among pigs before imposing new licensing conditions as appropriate, so as to avoid any adverse impact on the operating costs of pig farms as a result of such new measures, whether the Government will respond to the demand of members of the industry;

(4) as there are views that apart from biosecurity measures implemented in farms, ASF outbreak may also be caused by other segments in the supply chain (including transportation vehicles and slaughterhouses), of the measures put in place by the Government to improve the various segments and reasonably delineate the responsibilities of relevant persons in these segments;

(5) whether it knows the latest situation of ASF vaccine development by experts in various countries and the difficulties involved; and

(6) as there are views that wild pigs are one of the vectors of ASF, of the latest measures taken by the Government in preventing the spread of ASF by wild pigs, as well as their effectiveness?

Reply:

President,

Regarding the Hon Steven Ho's question, my reply to the question is as follows:

(1) The number of African Swine Fever (ASF) cases detected in local pig farms requiring culling of pigs and the cumulative number of pigs culled in each of the past five years are as follows:

Year	Number of ASF cases detected in local pig farms requiring culling of pigs	Cumulative number of pigs culled per year
2019	0	0
2020	0	0
2021	1	3 979
2022	0	0
2023	7	13 494
2024 (as at February 20)	4	4 070

(2) The Government has always attached great importance to the impact of ASF on local pig farmers and the pig industry, and has been closely monitoring its latest development. According to preliminary investigations and analysis by international veterinary experts, since all of the animal carcass collection stations near pig farms with ASF outbreak between November 2023 and January 2024 are located on the same animal carcass collection route, it is suspected that the recent ASF outbreak cases are likely to be related to animal carcass collection trucks and animal carcass collection stations. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has not only stepped up its work in handling pig carcasses, including thoroughly cleansing and disinfecting all relevant animal carcass collection stations, but also immediately put in place animal carcass collection arrangements to separate high-risk areas from non-high-risk areas. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is currently working with international veterinary experts to conduct further investigation. The AFCD has also reported relevant cases to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and sent relevant samples to the WOAH's ASF reference laboratory for genetic sequencing analysis, so as to assess the epidemiological links between recent

ASF outbreak cases. The AFCD will continue to maintain close contact with international veterinary experts on relevant matters and announce the investigation results in a timely manner.

ASF is not a zoonotic disease and will not infect humans, hence does not cause any food safety risk. However, positive cases should be seriously and promptly handled as the effect of ASF is very lethal to pigs. The AFCD has implemented a series of enhanced measures to curb the spread of ASF in local pig farms at different levels. Relevant measures include: (i) added additional livestock keeping licence conditions, requiring pig farms to implement and strictly abide the biosecurity measures applicable to their pig farms, and sampling for ASF virus in accordance with relevant guidelines to obtain a negative test result before discarding pig carcasses; (ii) the AFCD collaborated with international veterinary experts to explain and provide training to each of the local pig farms on biosecurity measures; (iii) launched the Guidelines for Reporting Cases of ASF to strengthen the knowledge of local pig farmers of the clinical signs of ASF, so as to assist pig farmers in identifying suspected cases for early reporting and to take appropriate follow-up; (iv) distributed sampling materials and protective clothing to all local pig farms, and strengthened inspections; (v) surveillance of the activities of wild pigs (especially in the vicinity of the infected pig farms); and (vi) the AFCD and relevant departments will continue to strictly enforce the cleansing and disinfection of live pig transport vehicles and slaughterhouses to reduce the risk of cross-contamination with ASF.

The AFCD is also keeping close communication with pig farmers via SMS groups to update them on the latest situation and prevention of ASF. After the pigs of infected pig farms were culled, the AFCD will pay statutory compensation and ex-gratia payment to the affected pig farmers, and will also closely communicate with them on the relevant arrangements for resumption of operations and provide technical support to assist the relevant pig farms to resume operations as soon as possible.

In order to promote the modernisation and sustainable development of agriculture and fisheries, the Government and the industry have jointly formulated the Blueprint for the Sustainable Development of Agriculture and Fisheries which will advocate the industry to build multi-storey modern environmentally friendly livestock farms, including the provision of government sites in the Sheung Shui area to livestock farms affected by government development projects for the industry to build multi-storey livestock farms, and provide technical and financial support. We expect that with modernised construction and high-tech management models, multi-storey livestock farms will be able to further improve the livestock rearing environment and biosecurity level, and be more effective in the prevention of the spread of infectious diseases such as ASF.

(3) Since a considerable number of local pig farms were affected by ASF in a short period of time between November 2023 and January 2024, the AFCD must take quick actions in order to curb the spread of the virus in local pig farms. After detailed explanations and consultation with the trade, two

licence conditions were added on January 23, 2024 to strengthen the dead pig detection arrangements and biosecurity requirements of local pig farms. The relevant measures are aimed at strengthening prompt epidemic prevention and control, otherwise the further spread of the virus will cause huge losses to the entire industry. The AFCD will continue to maintain communication with the trade and provide appropriate assistance for the trade in complying with the new licence conditions.

(4) Since June 2019, a daily clearance arrangement has been imposed in slaughterhouses, whereby all local and Mainland live pigs will be slaughtered within 24 hours upon admittance to slaughterhouses. Lairages in different areas of the slaughterhouses will be cleared out and undergo thorough cleansing and disinfection every day. In addition, the AFCD and the FEHD have entrusted contractors and slaughterhouse operators to ensure that all pig transport vehicles are fully cleansed and disinfected before leaving the slaughterhouses, and additional manpower were also arranged for supervision, so as to minimise the risk of local spread of ASF as far as possible.

Starting from August 2021, the AFCD has required licensees of pig farms to only allow pig transport vehicles that have been thoroughly cleansed and disinfected to visit, while each pig transport vehicle could only visit one pig farm per trip, so as to reduce the chance of cross infection between pig farms. Moreover, spill prevention standards for local pig transport vehicles were established to reduce the risk of disease transmission caused by the spillage of pig waste.

As mentioned above, the FEHD has already stepped up their work in handling pig carcasses, including thorough cleansing and disinfection as well as animal carcass collection route arrangements. The Environmental Protection Department has also strengthened its work in handling pig manure as well as the cleansing and disinfection arrangements at all aspects.

(5) The AFCD has been paying close attention to the international development progress of ASF vaccines, and has maintained close contact with international veterinary experts on relevant matters. It is understood that some institutions outside Hong Kong have developed ASF vaccines in recent years, but the safety of the relevant vaccines has not yet been proven.

The WOAHA has repeatedly emphasised the importance of the quality and specifications of ASF vaccines. If substandard vaccines were used, apart from not being able to protect pigs from ASF infection, those vaccine strains of the virus might also undergo genetic mutation, causing pigs to become sick, thus jeopardising the monitoring of ASF and making its prevention and control more difficult.

(6) To cope with the issue of wild pig nuisance, under the premises of safeguarding public safety and maintaining public hygiene, the AFCD has been conducting regular operations to capture and humanely dispatch the wild pigs since late 2021. These operations target at sites with large numbers of wild pig sightings, and those with past injury cases caused by wild pigs or with wild pigs posing risks to members of the public. In the past year, the AFCD

has carried out over 210 wild pig capture operations, resulting in the capture and humanely dispatch of about 500 wild pigs. Furthermore, the AFCD has deployed staff to inspect countryside areas near pig farms affected by ASF and has installed surveillance cameras to monitor the occurrence of wild pigs. If deemed necessary, the AFCD will set up traps to capture wild pigs.