

LCQ4: Supply of live pigs

Following is a question by the Hon Wilson Or and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (October 30):

Question:

In May this year, the operation of Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (SSSH) was suspended for several days on two occasions as some pig samples collected there had been tested positive for African Swine Fever (ASF) virus, with the import of Mainland live pigs being suspended during such periods of time. It is learnt that since the resumption of the operation of the slaughterhouse on June 6, the average daily number of live pigs imported from the Mainland has been below 1 700, which is way lower than last year's daily average of around 4 000. It has been reported that as live pigs imported from the Mainland account for more than 90 per cent of the total live pig supply, and with demand outstripping supply, the auction price of live pigs and the retail price of fresh pork are substantially higher than the levels in the past. Furthermore, owing to the drop in the number of pigs slaughtered, there is a pressure for live pig delivery and slaughtering fees to rise. Therefore, the retail price of fresh pork might rise further. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows why the import of live pigs from the Mainland has not returned to the previous level since the resumption of the operation of SSSH; whether it has taken measures to make the import of live pigs restore to the previous level as soon as possible, e.g. discussing with the Mainland authorities the expansion of the list of registered pig farms on the Mainland for supply to Hong Kong and Macao, or considering the exploration of new sources of live pigs;

(2) whether it has assessed the impacts of the persistently high fresh pork price on those industries related to live pigs, restaurants and members of the public; and

(3) whether it has taken new measures to prevent the contraction of ASF by local and imported pigs, the contraction of diseases by pigs through cross-transmission in the slaughterhouses, and the outbreak of ASF in Hong Kong?

Reply:

President,

(1) and (2) Most of the live pigs supplied in Hong Kong come from the Mainland. Since May this year, the supply of live pigs from the Mainland has remained at low level and the price of fresh pork has surged, thus affecting people's livelihood and operation of the trade. The Government is highly concerned about the situation and has been liaising closely with the Mainland

authorities to reflect the desire of the trade and the public for increasing the supply.

The Mainland authorities have strived to maintain a steady supply of live pigs to Hong Kong. However, the production and supply of live pigs on the Mainland have also been affected by the outbreak of African Swine Fever (ASF). The latest figures released by the National Bureau of Statistics saw a drop in the overall supply of live pigs on the Mainland, with the number of pigs supplied to the market in the first three quarters this year and the number of pigs stocked at farm in end September recording a year-on-year decline of 17.3 per cent and 28.5 per cent respectively. The price of fresh pork has also increased on the Mainland. As estimated earlier by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the supply of pork in the second half of this year will be further tightened.

As for the exploration of other sources of live pig supply, the trade has earlier proposed to import from other countries (such as Thailand and South Korea). While the Government stands ready to explore the feasibility with and facilitate co-ordination among trades and stakeholders, we have to exercise caution as importation of live food animals entails public health and food safety considerations, and cases of ASF have occurred in many other countries.

The far-reaching implications of ASF for the supply of live pigs on the Mainland and worldwide are gradually emerging. The Mainland authorities have introduced an array of measures to ensure a stable production and supply of live pigs. Under the current situation, we will continue to closely monitor the supply and price of live pigs, and maintain close liaison with the Mainland authorities. In addition, the Government announced in August this year a series of helping measures for enterprises and residents, and some of these measures can ease the financial pressure on industries affected by ASF and the supply of live pigs. These measures include reducing rental by half for six months for stalls in public markets of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, and waiving the licence fee for fresh provision shops, slaughterhouses and pig farms for a year.

(3) ASF virus is tough and fast-spreading and there is currently no vaccine or medication available. Therefore, to ensure a steady supply of live pigs in the long run, the most important task at present is to continue our preventive measures against the disease.

Owing to the occurrence of two ASF cases in Hong Kong in May this year, preventive 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 ASF spreading in Hong Kong has been largely

minimised. The implementation of the arrangement is smooth so far. We will continue to ensure that the daily clearance arrangement is sustained and followed through. In addition, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) will continue to ensure that biosecurity measures are properly adopted at local pig farms and carry out active surveillance on the farms through regular inspections. If pigs are suspected to be infected, AFCD will conduct disease investigation and collect samples for testing. There are no suspected cases found in Hong Kong so far.

At the second meeting of the standing group of experts on ASF organised by the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in July this year, the attending experts regarded that each region should take its own situation into consideration, such as the stocking density, demand and supply of live pigs etc., to formulate practical and effective measures and policies. Given that the local slaughterhouses have already implemented the daily clearance arrangement, the experts considered that the possibilities of infection and spread of virus to other pigs in Hong Kong has been largely minimised. Therefore, if an ASF case occurs in a local slaughterhouse, the closure of the slaughterhouse and mass culling of other pigs are not necessary. The Government has thus updated the contingency plans, and put them into practice when an ASF case was found in Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse in early September this year. The impact on the public and stakeholders was greatly lessened.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the outbreak, refine the preventive measures, and liaise with different parties, striving to lower the risk of spreading disease and maintain steady supply of live pigs, thereby minimising the impact on the public and stakeholders. As for the public, we will continue to disseminate the message that ASF will not be transmitted to human and remind the public to cook the pork well before consumption.