

Additional measures to prevent avian flu

The Government is stepping up measures to minimise the risk of avian influenza coming to Hong Kong, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, Dr Yeoh Eng-kiong, told a press conference today (January 30).

"Public health always comes first and it is always our most important and foremost consideration," Dr Yeoh said.

In view of the oversupply of chickens in the markets, the traders will be asked to suspend the importation of chickens into markets until the supply and demand situation is steady.

"The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) will also stop issuing approval for local farms to release their chickens to the markets," Dr Yeoh said.

"As there is a risk of getting infections from wild birds and migratory birds, the Mai Po Marshes and the walk-in aviaries in recreational parks will be closed temporarily to protect public health."

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) will also be amending its mechanism to provide for early termination of market tenancies and cancellation of fresh provision shop licences if there is a breach of special conditions.

"All poultry retailers have to wear aprons and boots while at work, and they must also wear rubber gloves when handling live poultry. Otherwise, they will breach the special conditions in the tenancy agreement/licensing conditions. After one verbal warning, the tenancy or licence will be terminated if the offence is repeated," Dr Yeoh added.

On the wholesale front, the AFCD will require all workers in the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Poultry Wholesale Market to wear gloves when handling live poultry, and make this a requirement in the market's rules.

The AFCD will also require all poultry farm workers to wear gloves as one of the biosecurity measures in the farm licensing conditions.

Dr Yeoh said that the two departments would be strengthening the surveillance programmes for a possibility of avian influenza in markets, at border points and in farms.

"We will be stepping up surveillance measures of imported chickens. We will be increasing the number of tests and strengthening our inspections," he said.

The Mainland authorities have set stringent quality-control measures for farms that are authorised to supply live and chilled chickens to Hong Kong.

As for the suggestion that traders be required to be vaccinated against influenza, Dr Yeoh said the Government always encouraged traders to do so.

However, this vaccination does not protect traders against avian influenza. The vaccination can only be on a voluntary basis.

Earlier this morning, Dr Yeoh chaired an inter-departmental meeting with representatives from the AFCD, FEHD, Department of Health and the Hospital Authority. The purpose was to review the current strategies and see which areas could be strengthened to guard against avian influenza and to plan for various scenarios in view of the evolving avian influenza situation in the region.

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