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Thailand Halts the Idea to Introduce Avian Influenza Vaccination

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Report Highlights:

After being a big debate over the last few months, the Thai government officially put away the proposed idea to introduce avian influenza vaccination in Thailand.

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Executive Summary

After being a big debate over the last few months, the Thai government officially put away the proposed idea to introduce avian influenza vaccination in Thailand. Many believed that the government's decision reflected its concern on the economic and political impact of vaccination rather than human health and disease control aspects. The government and export-oriented poultry processors fear that the vaccination use would shut the door completely on Thai chicken exports, especially from such major buying countries as the EU and Japan. However, it is widely rumored that several poultry raisers, especially layer farmers and fighting cock raisers, illegally used vaccines smuggled from China and Hong Kong.

Debate on Introducing AI Vaccination

The reoccurrence of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), H5N1 type, in July 2004 warns that the disease may become endemic to Thailand and caused poultry farmers to fear that the government's current stamping-out program may not be sufficient to eradicate the disease. As a result, a group of layer farms and native chicken raisers (mostly small scale farmers which lack of capital to improve their farm biosecurity as recommended by the government) voiced their concern and pressed the government to consider vaccination. However, a group of exported-oriented broiler processors strongly opposed this idea.

The government placated the integrated by setting up a national-level committee, the National Veterinary Council (NVC), in mid July to study possible strategies against avian influenza and gave it two months to decide on introducing bird-flu vaccination in critical areas. The committee was to review: the disease situation; epidemiological factors especially the transmission mechanism between flocks as well as humans; poultry production systems; current control measures and the possibility to apply more stringent control measures such as biosecurity in some sectors; the possibility to control and monitor outcomes of vaccination; and the possible impact of vaccination on Thailand.

On September 15, 2004, the NVC submitted a report to the Thai Deputy Prime Minister, agreeing that: (1) AI vaccination for all kinds of poultry would be prohibited; (2) The government will accelerate improving farm biosecurity system in the country regarding disease prevention into farms and out of farms, farm registration, improving farms to meet required standards, movement control of animals, control of poultry slaughterhouses, and pro-active surveillance measures; (3) The government would study and research on AI virus and vaccines to monitor possible viral mutation and to determine the proper measures in the case that any serious outbreak occurs. However, this research would be conducted in laboratory and by the government only; and (4) The government would closely consult with relevant international organization and trading-partner countries before it introduces vaccination for ornamental birds and fighting cocks.

According to the Committee, this decision was based on the following factors:

1. Aspect of Public Health: Several studies support the hypothesis that HPAI virus can mutate into a deadly human virus if it is transmitted from poultry to human being. Meanwhile, based on the study of the use of vaccine in Mexico, the avian influenza virus has ability to mutate, despite being under the disease control by vaccination. The NVC is concerned that vaccinated poultry could still possibly transmit AI disease to poultry raisers (especially fighting cock farmers/raisers who normally close contact with their birds) and put the public health at risk if the disease mutates further.

2. Aspect of Vaccine Quality: The results of vaccinations trials that are reported as effective in many studies are mostly assessed under the controlled laboratory conditions. The NVC is concerned that vaccination in field conditions may not be as effective as that in laboratory conditions. In addition, many studies show the AI vaccines are most effective when at least 90% of the viral vaccine strains correspond to disease virus strains.

3. Aspect of Disease Control: The farming system in Thailand is much diversified, from backyard to state-of-art farming and from domestic-oriented to export-oriented. The use of vaccine, which must be monitored closely, may not succeed based on the fact that backyard farms lack the ability to improve their disease prevention and control systems.

4. Aspect of Economic Impact: The buying countries of Thai chicken meat, especially the EU and Japan, will definitely ban imported chicken meat from Thailand once the

vaccination is introduced in Thailand. Although these two countries have a process of inspection and certification to allow imports, there is no guarantee on the timeframe that Thai exports to these countries would be re-opened.

The economic impact is apparently the greatest concern of the government when considering the reaction by the Thai Prime Minister in a Cabinet meeting on October 12 to the request by the Ministry of Agriculture for building an AI vaccine plant in Thailand. The Director General of Department of Livestock Development (DLD) stated that the vaccine plant, costing nearly USD 10 million and reportedly able to produce up to 100 million doses of AI vaccine, would be used for study and research purpose only. However, several newspapers reported later that the Prime Minister was frustrated to see this proposal and asked the Cabinet to withdraw it and denounced that this action by the DLD would confuse the public. Despite not mentioning explicitly, the “public” in this term should represent “buying countries of Thai chicken”.

Rumor of Smuggled Vaccine Use

Although AI vaccination is prohibited, it is widely rumored that several poultry raisers, especially layer farmers and fighting cock raisers, have illegally used smuggled vaccines from China and Hong Kong.

In response to questions by the public, mainly from buying countries of Thai chicken meat, the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), an agency which directly monitors the use of animal vaccines, has officially banned the use of bird flu vaccine and started a crackdown on any violation. A regulation was adopted to ban the import, production, sale and use of all avian influenza vaccine in the country. Public Health Minister Sudarat Keyuraphan said in mid-August that the government took the action for the sake of public health, and anyone violating it would face up to 5 years' imprisonment. Meanwhile, the ministry also opened a hot line and offered a cash reward for those reporting the violators. The Ministry later raided some suspected poultry farms in Thailand. However, trade sources indicated that the MOPH found difficult to arrest violators, mainly because the MOPH lack information on the poultry farms and proper methods of tracing back illegal use of vaccination in animals.

End of Report