

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: Hong Kong Suspends Imports of Small Mammals Amid Fears of COVID Transmissions

Country: Hong Kong

Post: Hong Kong

Report Category: Agriculture in the Economy, Agriculture in the News, Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

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Report Highlights:

The Hong Kong government ordered the culling of 2000 hamsters in Hong Kong. The order was issued over fears of an animal-to-human transmission of the COVID-19 virus after a pet shop saleswoman tested positive for the Delta variant, and samples collected from hamsters at the pet shop were also positive. As a result, effective January 18, 2022, Hong Kong authorities have suspended the import of all small mammals (including hamsters) and it is currently reviewing import procedures. During the first eleven months of 2021, the value of Hong Kong's global imports of small mammals grew 7.7 percent to \$2.1 million.

The Hong Kong government (HKG) continues to work under a Zero-COVID policy and is investigating possible transmission links to every COVID-19 confirmed case. A saleswoman working in a local pet shop was recently infected with Delta variant. This is the first Delta case in Hong Kong for at least three months. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) collected and tested samples from hamsters, chinchillas and rabbits in the shop for COVID-19. As of January 18, 2022, 11 samples collected from hamsters tested *preliminarily* positive for the COVID-19 virus, while the test results of other animals were negative. In addition, the AFCD is also collecting samples from small animals in the warehouse of the pet shop. While testing results are not yet available, some of the environmental swabs were tested positive for the virus. In addition, a pet shop customer was also confirmed to be infected with COVID-19.

Culling of 2000 Hamsters and Temporary Closing of 34 Pet Shops

Upon these findings, the AFCD ordered the humane culling of all animals in the pet shop and its warehouse in question. In addition, all pet shops in Hong Kong selling hamsters, about 34 in total, must suspend business starting from January 18, 2022 and their hamsters will be taken for COVID-19 testing and humane disposal. Other animals will be tested, and pet shops will be able to resume business if tests results are satisfactory.

According to the AFCD records, two consignments of hamsters were imported into Hong Kong on December 22, 2021, and January 7, 2022 and were considered as the source of the recent COVID-19 cases. Thus, the AFCD is strongly advising the public surrender hamsters purchased on or after December 22, 2021, to the authorities for humane dispatch. The government does not have legislative power to require the public to surrender their hamsters.

The government conducted a press conference explaining to the public how the culling of hamsters is necessary to minimize the associated risks of animal-to-human transmission and to safeguard public health. They believed this was the first known instance of hamsters contracting COVID-19 outside a laboratory setting. While animal welfare groups are objecting to this decision, local health experts support this drastic measure. Local experts said the most concerning is that some mutations found in the saleswoman's sample could not be identified in a global genomic data bank and, at this stage, they cannot tell whether there are any problems with those mutations.

It is estimated that about 2,000 hamsters lost their lives in this exercise. Reportedly, the consignments were imported from the Netherlands. About 150 customers of the pet shop in question were quarantined for precautionary measure.

Reviewing Import Procedures

As of the date of this report, the AFCD has suspended the import of small mammals and is reviewing import procedures. Measures under consideration include whether to require small animals to be

screened before they are shipped to the city and after they arrive, and mandatory quarantine upon arrival. U.S. exporters can expect stricter import regulations on small mammals when Hong Kong resumes trade.

During the first eleven months of 2021, the value of Hong Kong's global imports of small mammals (HS code 010619) grew 7.7 percent year on year to \$2.1 million. Outside the Asia region, the Netherlands is a significant supplier of small mammals to Hong Kong. While imports from the United States recorded triple digit growth in 2021, imports have not recovered to 2018 levels.

Attachments:

No Attachments.