In Tackling Avian Flu, Address Public Health and Environmental Issues

The threat of an avian flu pandemic calls for innovative solutions that address both public health issues, as well as environmental and sustainable development concerns, said Koh Kheng Lian, professor of law at National University of Singapore and the director of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law.

Koh is a respected expert on environmental law and has done work with the Asia Development Bank, World Bank Institute and United Nations. At a public program at the East-West Center in November, she called for cooperation not only at a regional but also global scale, involving governments and organizations such as ASEAN, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization.

"President Bush has called for cooperation not only among governments but among all the stakeholders," she said, explaining that input must come not just from the top down but from all stakeholders as well.

Unfortunately, she cautioned, policymakers are not taking a broad enough approach as they develop policies, looking only at the public health or human

impact while neglecting to consider the repercussions environmentally.

While governments would be at fault if they did not heed early warnings, instead accepting false reassurances and allowing the flu to take root, overreacting with costly and unnecessary practices in response to false alarms would be harmful to humans, animals and the environment, she said.

Singapore has been cited as a model for tackling bird flu, Koh said. It has spent $30 million for drugs, $75 million to enable its hospitals to prepare for a possible outbreak, instituted twice a month testing of migratory birds and increased biosecurity of all poultry and slaughterhouses.

In developing guidelines, she encouraged policymakers to be more proactive — to address, for example, what causes the avian flu — not focus too narrowly on human health issues while ignoring the effect poorly developed and short-sighted policies will have on the environment and sustainable development. If large numbers of migratory birds were destroyed, for example, she said, there could be repercussions for crops and harvesters that are dependent on the birds for pest control.

Citing examples of unilateral environmental agreements on biodiversity in the past, she called for solutions that are forward-looking and multi-disciplinary, and warned against using "yesterday's approaches" to solve current threats and future problems.