

Abattoirs forced to shut on Sundays

There will be no fresh pork and beef on sale on Sunday — when the sit-in by 320 health inspectors forces Government abattoirs to close for the first time ever.

An Urban Services Department spokesman said yesterday the suspension of normal slaughtering at the abattoirs is planned for every Sunday.

A rash of panic buying and price increases — which has so far been avoided — are expected to come at the end of the week.

The acting Director of Agriculture and Fisheries, Dr C. T. Wong, up till last night was not certain how his department would handle the slaughter of the expected imports of pigs and cattle from China on Sunday.

Meanwhile, all permits for the import and unloading of livestock to Hongkong have been stopped. Permits are not required for imports from China.

Meat dealers were angered by the news. Their representatives will approach the Urban Services Department this morning to ask that the two abattoirs be kept running.

In another development, the major Chinese goods agent, Ng Fung Hong reported yesterday that livestock awaiting shipment to Hongkong are dying from the extreme heat.

Dr Wong will contact Ng Fung Hong today regarding

the fate of the livestock expected to be imported for Sunday's slaughtering.

"We only heard of the suspension late this afternoon. There has been no time to decide yet," he said.

But imports from China remain normal although Ng Fung Hong was approached at the start of the industrial action to reduce imports.

"It's in their own interest to reduce imports as once our holding spaces are filled, they will have to keep livestock on the other side of the border," a spokesman said.

The sit-in has also caused the deaths of some animals at the Kennedy Town and Cheungshawan abattoirs.

As the sit-in by members of the Public Health Inspectors Association enters its seventh day today, the Civil Service Union has reiterated: "We will wait it out."

The group is clamouring for more money and an improved grading scale. Union members have said threats of dismissal or suspension will not scare them off their action.

The department has re-deployed about 28 senior health officials to do the jobs of the health inspectors in a bid to keep the slaughtering as close to average levels as possible.

During the two days before the Dragon Boat Festival, and on the day of the festival itself, the number of animals slaughtered at the

abattoirs dropped by only 17.7 per cent when compared with last year, the spokesman said.

"This was possible because the senior staff who have taken over emergency duties at the abattoirs have made a special effort to keep up production as much as possible to lessen the effect on the public.

"They have been working non-stop since last Friday but

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it is not humanly possible to keep up this pace indefinitely. Therefore the department has reluctantly decided to suspend slaughtering on Sundays," he said.

Meanwhile, the number of pigs slaughtered yesterday was only 1,000 below the daily average of 8,400. A total of 459 cattle were killed. Business should increase

at the two private slaughter houses in Taiipo and Yuen Long this weekend when demand from meat dealers is expected to increase.

Meat prices have so far remained relatively steady — costing only \$1 a catty more than usual.

Meat dealers have also lost business due to late deliveries.

A spokesman for the Pork Traders General Association, Mr Lai Sing said last night that meat dealers in Hongkong will lose at least \$1 million in operating expenses on Sunday.

"And what of our profits?" he asked in outrage.

Besides visiting the Urban Services Department this morning, his association will appeal to Unofficial Members of the Executive and Legislative Councils tomorrow to keep the abattoirs open.