

For discussion
on 28 March 2002

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

RECALL ON FOOD ITEMS CONTAINING STEVIOSIDE

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the sequence of events surrounding the recall of food items containing stevioside by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), the regulatory control of artificial sweeteners and the related food surveillance.

The Incident

2. On 18 March 2002, the Singaporean media reported that several food items were recalled by the Singaporean authority after confirming that stevioside was listed as an ingredient on their labels. As stevioside is not a permitted artificial sweetener under the Food Adulteration (Artificial Sweeteners) Regulations (Cap. 132 sub. leg. U), FEHD immediately contacted the Singaporean food safety authority for further details and launched an investigation based on the information in hand. Of the six food items

recalled in Singapore, it was found that three of them were on sale in Hong Kong. However, unlike the situation in Singapore, there is no mention of stevioside on their labels. In order to ascertain the composition of the products, FEHD made enquiries with the Japanese manufacturers, and notified the relevant food safety authority in Japan to follow up on the case. Also, FEHD immediately sent staff to various retail outlets to conduct inspections. As at 25 March 2002, a total of 71 food items with stevioside marked on their labels have been recalled, while one food item with its label not in conformity with its composition has also been recalled. Meanwhile, another food item has been voluntarily recalled by its distributor to avoid market confusion after it came to his notice that the product was included in the Singaporean recall list. The list of the 73 food items so recalled is set out at Annex I.

Regulatory Control of Artificial Sweeteners

3. In Hong Kong, the use of artificial sweeteners is regulated by the Food Adulteration (Artificial Sweeteners) Regulations (Cap.132 sub. leg. U). The Regulations prescribe ten permitted artificial sweeteners (Annex II) in the Schedule. Any person using artificial sweeteners not specified in the Schedule shall be liable to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and maximum imprisonment of 6 months. Furthermore, the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations (Cap. 132 sub. leg. W) provide that prepackaged food shall be labelled with the appropriate category and/or the specific name

of the additives (including artificial sweeteners) it contains.

Safety Assessment on the Consumption of Stevioside

4. Stevioside is a plant extract and is sweet to taste. The internationally recognized food safety authority, the Joint Food and Agriculture Organisation/World Health Organisation Expert Committee on Food Additives of the United Nations (“the Committee”) carried out a safety assessment on the consumption of stevioside in 1998. Owing to shortcomings and variable quality of the research findings, the Committee suggested that further studies would be required before a conclusion on the safety assessment of stevioside could be arrived at. The Committee had not made any conclusion on the carcinogenicity of stevioside. Besides, the Committee was of the view that based on the information available, the reduction in fertility of animals after intake of stevia plant was probably not due to the stevioside contained in the plant.

5. At present, stevioside is permitted to be used in places such as Japan, Mainland China and Taiwan, and South Korea as a sweetener in all or specified food items. In Hong Kong, FEHD generally adopts the assessment results of the Committee as the key scientific references for food safety assessment. Since the Committee has not yet come to a conclusion regarding the safety of stevioside, it has not been included as one of the permitted artificial sweeteners in Hong Kong. We would monitor closely any future

development on the safety assessment of stevioside by the Committee with a view to considering whether the list of permitted artificial sweeteners should be updated.

Food Safety Control & Surveillance

6. The concept of food safety control is closely related to the entire food supply chain. We adopt a risk-based approach in carrying out our food safety control. Food safety assurance is best done by control at source with priority given to areas of higher risk. Risk assessment provides the scientific basis for food surveillance while risk communication conveys food surveillance results to the public in a proactive manner to enable them to make informed choices. Since food inevitably bears a certain degree of risk, food safety control aims at minimizing the risk to an acceptable level. Tripartite collaboration among the Government, the trade and the public is necessary for achieving this goal. While the Government's role is to enforce laws and educate the community, the trade (including the importers and distributors) is responsible for assuring food on sale complies with the legislation and is fit for human consumption. The public should also choose and handle food with care to maintain the last defence for food safety control.

7. Over 90 % of the food consumed in Hong Kong are imported. Since food safety control is best carried out at source, we attach great importance to the import control of food. For some staples and high-risk food like meat,

poultry and milk, we have dedicated laws, stringent preliminary assessment and inspection procedures in place to regulate their import. Take meat and poultry as examples, we will carry out stringent preliminary assessment on the hygiene conditions of all new places of origin. Each consignment of imported meat and poultry must be accompanied with a health certificate issued by an approved health authority. Moreover, the first 6 consignments of meat from the new place of origin must undergo hold-and-test inspection or sampling testing. They will be incorporated into our regular food surveillance programme after the test results of the first 6 consignments are confirmed to be satisfactory.

8. As for non-staple food and snacks, the large varieties of these relatively low-risk food items on the market, for instance, there are several thousand brands of biscuits, means that it will be impracticable in terms of resource utilisation or implementation to subject each and every kind of food item to pre-market inspection before release. Therefore, FEHD adopts a strategic and targetted approach to determine the food items to be tested and the number of samples to be taken according to risk-based assessment. FEHD carries out an ongoing food surveillance programme under which about 57000 to 60000 food samples are taken at import, wholesale and retail levels every year for chemical, microbiological, radioactivity and composition analyses. Substances to be tested include different types of colouring matters, artificial sweeteners, preservatives, heavy metals, mineral oil etc. While specific testings are conducted to find out whether the food samples comply with the food safety standards stipulated in the relevant legislation, general testings

are carried out to ensure food is fit for human consumption. In 2001, 57906 food samples were taken from the market under the food surveillance programme for analysis (results of the analysis at Annex III), representing 8 samples for every 1 000 population, much higher than the reference standard of 3 samples per 1 000 population in most developed countries.

Next Step

9. Over the past two years, FEHD tested 950 food samples on artificial sweeteners under the food surveillance programme. These tests are to ascertain if the food contains any of the ten permitted artificial sweeteners and whether it is consistent with that specified on the label. The programme in force also covers sampling for testing of certain preservatives, pesticides and colouring matters not found in the list of permitted substances under the relevant legislation. Following this incident, we will seek to improve the sensitivity of the programme. As we understand that the use of some food additives approved in their places of origin may be prohibited under the legislation of Hong Kong, our work will focus on sampling of popular food items likely to contain such food additives. In this respect, we will collaborate with the Government Laboratory to include, as appropriate, new test items in the programme. Given that examination and analysis of food samples collected under the programme is at present mainly carried out by the Government Laboratory and the Institute of Pathology of the Department of Health, FEHD is establishing a new Food Research Laboratory which upon completion, will enable us to strengthen our work in this area.

10. The existing Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations require that only the specific name or category of an additive has to be shown on the food label. In order to tighten up the requirement for labelling of food additives and to provide more information for consumers, we sought the advice of Members on the proposed legislation amendments to the effect that both the category and specific name of an additive should be shown on the label at a meeting of the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene held in January last year. In view of the limited space available on a food label, we considered allowing manufacturers to use the identification number used in the International Numbering System for Food Additives laid down by the Codex Alimentarius Commission as an alternative to the full names of the additives. Panel members were in general supportive of the proposal. The amendment regulation is being drafted and we aim to submit it to the Legislative Council for scrutiny later this year. We will also enhance our work on public education and publicity to familiarize the public with the meaning and function of food labels. At the same time, we will continue to advise the trade on how to observe the food labelling requirements.

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

March 2002

List of Recall Food Items

As at 25 March 2002, a total of 73 food products have been recalled:

A. Recall ordered by FEHD because the labels of the products indicate that they contain stevioside

I. Sweeteners containing stevioside

- 1 Natchoro (蔭庄)
- 2 Diet Sugar (健之糖)
- 3 Skyslim (天之秀)

II. Products containing stevioside

Canned food

- 1 SABA MISONI (PREPARED MACKEREL)

Dried food

- 1 丸美屋 2 個味付白飯
- 2 MARUMIYA NORITAMA 丸美屋
- 3 RICE SEASONING "MARUMIYA" FURIKAKE TARAKO 丸美屋
- 4 FURIKAKE – TAPPURI YASAI 丸美屋大袋野菜
- 5 MEIKAN MISUZU HITOKUCHI SAN DRY TOFU (DRY TOFU)

Drinks

- 1 POCARI SWEAT STEVIA (寶礦力)
- 2 JIANLIBAO SPORTS DRINK HONEY LEMON 健力寶 (檸蜜)

- 3 JIANLIBAO SPORTS DRINK HONEY ORANGE 健力寶 (橙蜜)
- 4 HOT LEMONADE DRINK

Noodle

- 1 NISSIN BOWL UDON (BEEF) (日式鮮牛肉烏冬 -碗裝烏冬)
- 2 NISSIN BOWL UDON (CURRY) (日式咖喱烏冬-碗裝烏冬)
- 3 NISSIN BOWL UDON (TEMPURA) (日式天婦羅烏冬-碗裝烏冬)
- 4 SAPPORO SHOYU RAMEN NOODLE (HONIHO)
- 5 中華辣醬麵
- 6 MYOJO CHUKAZANMAI 明星中華三昧 (廣東風拉麵)

Prickled food

- 1 PICKLED BURDOCK "SHINSHIN" YAMAGOBO ZUKE
- 2 PICKLES TOKAI TAKANAZUKE 高菜漬
- 3 茄瓜漬
- 4 TOBIDASE GENKI 蒜頭漬
- 5 甘酢生姜
- 6 乾燥昆布卷
- 7 TOPVALU (韓式泡菜)
- 8 MARUKOSHI YAMAU BIBINBA PICKLED VEGETABLE

Sauce

- 1 “上字” 北海道昆布醬油
- 2 SALAD DRESSING QP DRESSING COLE SLOW
- 3 "QP" PANKOBO PIZZA SPREAD
- 4 "QP" PANKOBO PIZZA SAUCE
- 5 DRESSING QP DRESSING TASTY ITALIAN
- 6 MAYONNAISE PANKOBO CORN HAYO SPREAD

7 錦胡麻

Snack

- 1 Kiku Prawn Cracker (Kiku 蝦餅)
- 2 Kariri (固力菓加利利脆條)
- 3 Chocolat de Pretz (固力菓朱古力百力滋)
- 4 Milk Pretz (固力菓牛奶味百力滋)
- 5 Ika Mirin Shrimp Cracker (Koebi Sen 蝦餅)
- 6 Ika Mirin Cuttle Fish Cracker (Ika Mirin 魷魚餅)
- 7 Kiku Cuttle Fish Cracker (Kiku 鮮魷大海餅)
- 8 Pringles Potato Crisps (Mild Salt Flavor) 薯片(日式清新口味)
- 9 Glico Kiss Mint (固力菓 Kiss Mint 香口味)
- 10 AJI ICHIBAN SOY SAUCE CRACKER 優之良品醬油燒餅
- 11 味梅 - 調味梅干 SHINSHIN UMEBOSHI AJIUME
- 12 OTOUFU JELLY (Strawberry Milk Flavour)
- 13 OTOUFU JELLY (Orange Yogurt Flavour)
- 14 OTOUFU JELLY (Grape Yogurt Flavour)
- 15 梅子
- 16 米菓
- 17 GOOD TASTE 芝士滋味筒
- 18 NINIKU SHO YU POTATO CHIPS
- 19 YAMAYOSHI POTATO CHIPS“山芳”薯片(燒雞味)
- 20 “S & B” 本格薯片
- 21 YAMAYOSHI POTATO CHIPS“山芳”薯片(蒜茸味)
- 22 KOCHA KAN CANDY 紅茶茶館
- 23 YAMAYOSHI POTATO CHIPS“山芳”薯片(燒牛肉味)
- 24 YAMAYOSHI POTATO CHIPS“山芳”薯片(芥辣牛肉味)

- 25 墨魚脆餅
- 26 EBI DAIGORO CRACKER 大五郎
- 27 KAMEDA AJI NO SHIN '15' RICE CRACKER 味之四季彩
- 28 米菓 (穗之香 10) (Orange Label)
- 29 米菓 (穗之香 15) (Green Label)
- 30 UMEKA 紫蘇紀州梅
- 31 米菓 (GOLD)
- 32 TANESEI MEIJI (CARL STICK CHEESE AJI SNACK)
- 33 SHOWA MARUMIYA (SESAME & LAYER FLAKE) 丸美屋
- 34 TANESEI MEIJI (CARL STICK USUAI CORN STICK)

Seasoning

- 1 日本納豆飯素
- 2 DR.SLUMP 缶庄 IQ 博士味粉
- 3 金菇蓉

<p>B. Recall ordered by FEHD because the labels of the products do not conform with its composition</p>
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1. Dried melon seeds (洽洽香瓜子)

<p>C. Recall initiated by food trade for facilitation of investigations by FEHD (so far there is no evidence suggesting that the food item contains stevioside): 1 food item</p>

1. Nissin UFO Oomori Yaki Soba Instant Noodle (日清 UFO 快熟麵)

**The Ten Permitted Artificial Sweeteners
Specified in the Food Adulteration
(Artificial Sweeteners) Regulations
(Subsidiary Legislation of Cap. 132)**

1. Saccharin
2. Saccharin Sodium
3. Saccharin Calcium
4. Aspartame
5. Acesulfame Potassium
6. Cyclamic Acid
7. Sodium Cyclamate
8. Calcium Cyclamate
9. Thaumatin
10. Sucralose

Results of the Food Surveillance Programme in 2001

Type of Tests	No. of Samples	No. of Unsatisfactory Samples	Unsatisfactory rate (%)
Chemical¹	35 801	211	0.6
Microbiological	19 045	466	2.4
Others²	1 840	0	0
Total	56 686 (57 906³)	677	1.2

¹ Chemical testing includes examination on food additives, contaminants, composition and labelling.

² Other testing includes radioactivity analysis.

³ A total of 57 906 samples were collected in 2001. As at 31 December 2001, the test reports of 56 686 samples have been received.