

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

IMPORT CONTROL AND NEW LICENSING REQUIREMENTS FOR CHILLED MEAT

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the import control measures for chilled meat, the new licensing requirements/conditions imposed on chilled meat retailers and the related enforcement actions.

IMPORT CONTROL ON CHILLED MEAT

2. Import control on chilled meat is governed by the Imported Game, Meat and Poultry Regulations (IGMPR) under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap.132). The control system follows international practices and standards, and is applicable to all imports. Under the IGMPR, all imported meat must be accompanied by an official health certificate issued by a competent authority recognised by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene. The official health certificate should certify that the chilled meat it accompanies is fit for human consumption. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) will verify the official certificates at the two food inspection offices set up at the Hong Kong International Airport. FEHD officers will inspect each import consignment and, if necessary, take samples for testing before releasing the chilled meat for sale.

Prior Approval

3. Whenever there is a new source of imported meat, FEHD will assess the following information of the exporting country before allowing imports of chilled meat in the form of trial shipments -

- (a) the legislation governing the hygienic standard of the meat;

- (b) the animal disease situation;
- (c) the training and qualifications of the veterinarians and quarantine inspection personnel (e.g. the Health Inspectors) and whether their qualifications are internationally recognised;
- (d) the facilities and hygiene standard of the farm where the livestock is produced;
- (e) the facilities and hygiene standard of the slaughterhouse;
- (f) the facilities (including storage and delivery facilities) and hygiene standard of the processing plant; and
- (g) the pre-mortem and post-mortem quarantine inspection procedures.

Trial Shipment

4. FEHD will detain for examination the first three consignments of meat imported into Hong Kong on trial shipment. Such consignments can only be released to the market for sale after the testing results are satisfactory. If FEHD is satisfied with the first three consignments, each of the subsequent three consignments will be sampled for testing, although they can be released for sale before the final testing results are available. If the testing results are unsatisfactory, FEHD will ask the exporting country's authorities to suspend shipment, to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the causes of the problem and then send the investigation report to FEHD. FEHD will only allow imports of meat to resume when the exporting country's authorities have identified and corrected the relevant problem to the satisfaction of FEHD.

Regular Food Surveillance

5. Subsequent consignments will be put under the regular food surveillance system if FEHD is satisfied with the test results of the first six consignments from the new source of import. Samples will be taken at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing on a random basis under the food surveillance programme.

NEW LICENSING REQUIREMENT AND CONDITIONS ON THE STORAGE AND DISPLAY OF CHILLED MEAT AT RETAIL OUTLETS

6. To better ensure food safety, FEHD has decided to enhance controls on the sale of chilled meat at retail outlets, after consulting the food trade in March this year. FEHD will require all chilled meat for sale at retail outlets be stored and displayed in refrigerator(s) and at a suitable temperature. Details of the new measures are set out below.

7. On 22 June 2001, FEHD imposed additional licensing requirement and conditions to all licensed fresh provision shops (FPSs) and market stalls permitted to sell fresh meat¹ (pork, beef and mutton). These requirements and conditions have been put into effect on 24 September 2001.

8. These additional licensing requirements require chilling facilities with suitable capacity to be provided for the storage and display for sale of chilled meat in the FPSs and meat stalls. A thermometer must be provided in the refrigerator(s) to show the temperature inside the refrigerator.

9. Another additional licensing condition requires that the chilled meat delivered to the FPSs and meat stalls for sale has to be stored or displayed in the refrigerator(s) at a temperature not exceeding 4 degree Celsius at all times. The chilled meat should only be taken from the refrigerator(s) when it is sold to consumers. The additional licensing conditions also forbid the display, labelling and sale of chilled meat as fresh meat.

INSPECTION AND ENFORCEMENT ACTION

10. To ensure compliance with the additional licensing requirements and conditions, FEHD conducted 2 700 inspections during the week starting from 24 September 2001. FEHD issued two verbal warnings and one warning letter to FPS licensees and four verbal warnings and four warning letters to meat stall lessees for failure to comply with the new requirements and conditions. All cases were related to failure to provide proper chilling facilities. No such breaches were found in the follow-up inspections.

¹ Fresh meat refers to meat derived from animals locally slaughtered in slaughterhouses approved by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene.

11. Under the existing licensing control over FPSs, a first-time breach of any licensing condition will result in a verbal warning. Failure to comply at the next inspection will result in a written warning. The accumulation of three written warnings within a period of 12 months will result in an order for temporary suspension of the licensee for two days. Non-compliance detected after the two-day suspension will result in a doubling of the suspension period to four days. Further non-compliance will result in the licence being revoked. As for market stall lessees, non-compliance with any market stall tenancy condition will result in a verbal warning, followed by a written warning similar to breaches of FPS licence conditions. Accumulation of three written warnings within 12 months may lead to termination of tenancy.

12. In addition to regular inspections, FEHD, base on the distributors' list supplied by importers, will conduct blitz operations to check on the delivery ends. So far, FEHD has uncovered one unlicensed chilled meat distribution centre since the new licensing conditions took effect. Prosecution action is under way.

13. In the regular and surprise inspections to FPSs and meat stalls with permission to sell chilled meat, health inspectors will, in addition to checking the hygiene condition of the premises, the source of meat supply and whether chilled meat is properly stored inside chillers for sale, examine the meat for sale and ensure that it is fit for human consumption. If the inspecting officer finds that the meat displayed for sale has deteriorated to such an extent that it is no longer fit for human consumption, the operator of the retail shop will be prosecuted for selling food unfit for human consumption.

WAY FORWARD

14. FEHD will continue to monitor and control the sale of chilled meat and take stringent enforcement action when necessary.