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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Background Paper prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

Food Surveillance Programme

Purpose

This paper summarizes the discussions of the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on issues relating to the food surveillance programme.

Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132)

2. The Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) stipulates that all food on sale must be wholesome, unadulterated and fit for human consumption, and the subsidiary regulations under Cap. 132 stipulate standards for specific food products. As part of the overall food safety control strategy, a food surveillance programme has been put in place by the Administration for conformity checks to be performed on food products against prescribed standards or criteria.

3. Food surveillance involves the ongoing collection, analysis and interpretation of data on food hazards. It serves to assess whether food on sale is fit for human consumption and to ascertain whether prepackaged food is properly labelled. Under the food surveillance programme, food samples are collected at import, manufacture, wholesale and retail stages of the food supply chain. These include chemical, microbiological and/or radioactivity analyses on food samples based on their inherent risks, as well as composition analyses

on prepackaged food to assess the truthfulness of the labels.

Past discussions by the Panel

4. Since the 2000-01 session, the Panel has discussed the overall food surveillance system, the specific surveillance measures on live chickens and poultry to prevent avian flu, the control of local and imported food and live food animals, and the use of chemicals in food animals, hairy crabs, sauces and other food products.

Food surveillance system

5. At the Panel meeting on 26 March 2001, the Administration provided a paper on the overall food surveillance system and the improvements made to the food surveillance programme. The Administration informed members that Hong Kong had attained a high food-sampling rate of more than eight samples per thousand population each year, as compared to the international standard of three samples per thousand population.

6. The Administration also advised at the meeting that more efforts had been directed to risk assessment and risk communication, and that in 2000, topical risk assessment studies were conducted on surveillance results of four types of high-risk/seasonal food.

7. According to information on the government website, a new Food Research Laboratory will be set up within the Public Health Laboratory Centre to provide scientific data for risk assessment and formulation of food surveillance strategies.

8. When discussing contaminated food at the Panel meeting on 23 April 2001, a member specifically requested the Administration to provide food surveillance results and food assessment studies for public information. The issue will be followed up under agenda item III of the Panel meeting on 30 November 2001.

Enhanced surveillance on live poultry to prevent avian flu

9. Following the outbreaks of avian flu in 1997 and 2001, the Administration has enhanced the surveillance system to monitor the presence of H5 virus in the wholesale and retail markets. Apart from increasing the number of blood samples from chickens at border control points, blood samples (in addition to faecal samples) are also taken from chickens in wholesale markets for testing. The reporting system on death of chickens in markets is enhanced, and samples of dead chickens in retail markets are also taken for testing on a regular basis.

Chilled meat and chickens

10. At the Panel meeting on 26 March 2001, some members expressed concern about problems relating to the control over the import of chilled meat and chickens and the surveillance/monitoring measures in this regard. Members pointed out that the chilled meat and chickens were not labelled and were often sold as "fresh" meat/poultry at retail outlets, and this might pose food safety problems. Members were also concerned about the hygiene requirements for storage and display of chilled meat and chickens.

11. At the Panel meeting on 18 June 2001, the Administration briefed members on the sale of chilled chickens in Hong Kong. The Administration advised that the statutory food labelling requirements currently only applied to pre-packaged food. If any prepackaged frozen food was defrosted before sale, it should be clearly shown on the label. To address concerns about the risk of bacteria growth after the chilled meat/poultry was defrosted for sale, the Administration had provided guidelines on safe thawing to retailers.

12. At the meeting on 29 October 2001, the Panel discussed the new additional licensing conditions concerning the storage and display requirements for chilled meat/chickens. Members noted that chilled meat/poultry were required to be stored and displayed in refrigerators at a temperature not exceeding 4°C. Some members requested the Administration to apply consistent enforcement standards for fresh provision shops and public market stalls.

13. At the Panel meetings on 26 March 2001, 23 April 2001 and 18 June 2001, Panel members had raised concern about the problem of illegal importation of chilled meat and poultry. Members also urged the

Administration to step up efforts to combat the smuggling problem through measures such as increasing the surveillance of food items at control points and retail outlets.

Live food animals and clenbuterol in pork

14. The control of local and imported live food animals was discussed at the Panel meeting on 23 April 2001. The control measures on clenbuterol in pork and pig offal were discussed at the meeting on 17 July 2001.

15. Panel members expressed concern about the effectiveness of the pig tattoo system in detecting and tracing the origin of illegally slaughtered pigs. Some members raised the concern as to whether pigs imported from Thailand or the Mainland were subject to the same degree of surveillance as pigs from local farms.

16. The Administration advised that the importation of live food animals was subject to stringent control which was in line with international standards, and the same control system applied to live food animals imported from the Mainland or from other places. The Administration also provided information on the health control and surveillance system for pigs in Thailand at the meeting on 29 October 2001.

17. After the series of clenbuterol food poisoning cases in early 1998, the Administration has started to require urine tests to be taken on pigs before slaughtering. Legislative amendments were introduced in 2001 to prohibit the use of certain chemicals, including clenbuterol, in food animals by farmers and food animal traders. At the retail level, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department also carries out targeted food surveillance programme on clenbuterol in pork and pig offal.

18. As regards the pig tattoo system, members have suggested that the Administration should consider developing an effective identification system for pigs to facilitate tracking down of illegally slaughtered pigs, infectious diseases and improper use of chemicals in feeding food animals.

Surveillance of other food and sauces

19. The Panel has also discussed the surveillance and control measures to ensure the safety of other food such as hairy crabs, dairy products imported from places infected with foot-and-mouth diseases, and sauces used for cooking.

20. A list of the relevant papers discussed at the meetings of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene is in the **Appendix** for members' easy reference. These documents are available on the Research and Library Information system and the LegCo website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
29 November 2001

Relevant Papers

<u>Date of Panel meeting</u>	<u>Papers</u>
26 March 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Food Surveillance programme" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 1148/00-01(03)]</p> <p>Administration's paper entitled "Measures to control foot-and-mouth disease" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 1148/00-01(04)]</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 26 March 2001</p> <p>Administration's supplementary information on food surveillance programme [LC Paper No. CB(2)1435/00-01(01)]</p>
23 April 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Control of local and imported food and live food animals" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 1330/00-01(04)]</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 23 April 2001</p>
21 May 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Precautionary measures taken to arrest the spread of avian flu virus among poultry " [LC Paper No. CB(2) 1629/00-01(01)]</p> <p>Minutes of special meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 21 May 2001</p>
18 June 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Sale of chilled chickens in Hong Kong" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 1846/00-01(04)]</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 18 June 2001</p> <p>Administration's supplementary information paper entitled "Safe Thawing (a guide to thawing, packaging and selling of defrosted poultry)" [LC Paper No. CB(2)172/01-02(01)]</p>
18 June 2001 (joint Panel meeting)	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Reopening of poultry stalls and monitoring measures to prevent recurrence of avian flu" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 1852/00-01(01)]</p> <p>Minutes of joint meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene and Panel on Housing on 18 June 2001</p>

10 July 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Segregation of live quails from live poultry and the requirement for water bird viscera to be packed and sealed for sale" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 2065/00-01(01)]</p> <p>Minutes of special meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 10 July 2001</p> <p>Administration's information paper entitled "Poultry surveillance programme results" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 2065/00-01(02)]</p>
17 July 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "E.coli O157:H7 found in cattle carcass samples" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 2097/00-01(05)]</p> <p>Administration's paper entitled "Clenbuterol food poisoning incidents" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 2097/00-01(06)]</p> <p>Administration's paper entitled "Monitoring of chemical levels in sauces and other food products" [LC Paper No. CB(2)2097/00-01(07)]</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 17 July 2001</p>
5 September 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Surveillance and sampling of seawater in fish tanks used in the keeping of live seafood" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 2248/00-01(01)]</p> <p>Minutes of special meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 5 September 2001</p>
29 October 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Import control and new licensing requirements for chilled meat" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 167/01-02(04)]</p>
5 November 2001	<p>Administration's paper entitled "Monitoring the chemical contents of hairy crabs" [LC Paper No. CB(2) 272/01-02(01)]</p>