

立法會
Legislative Council

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LC Paper No. CB(2) 888/03-04
(These minutes have been seen by
the Administration)

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Minutes of Meeting
held on Tuesday, 25 November 2003 at 10:45 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building

Members present : Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP (Chairman)
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon WONG Yung-kan
Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung, BBS
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung
Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP
Dr Hon LO Wing-lok, JP

Member attending : Hon Mrs Selina CHOW LIANG Shuk-ye, GBS, JP

Public officers attending : Item III

Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene)
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Miss Vivian KO
Principal Assistant Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene) 1
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Dr S P MAK
Deputy Director (Food and Public Health)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Dr Y Y HO
Consultant (Community Medicine)
(Risk Assessment and Communication)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Item IV

Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene)
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Miss Vivian KO
Principal Assistant Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene) 1
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Dr Y Y HO
Consultant (Community Medicine)
(Risk Assessment and Communication)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Item V

Mr Eddy CHAN
Deputy Secretary (Food & Environmental Hygiene)
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Miss Shirley KWAN
Assistant Secretary (Food and Environmental Hygiene) 4
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

Mr W H CHEUK
Deputy Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene
(Environmental Hygiene)

Mr SIN Kwok-hau
Senior Superintendent (Cleansing & Hygiene)
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Mr LEE Yuk-shing
Chief Project Manager
Architectural Services Department

Clerk in attendance : Mrs Constance LI
Chief Assistant Secretary (2)5

Staff in attendance : Ms Amy WONG
Senior Assistant Secretary (2)1

Action

I Date of next meeting and items for discussion

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2) 407/03-04(01) & (02)]

Members agreed to discuss the following items, as proposed by the Administration and the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals respectively, at the next regular meeting scheduled for 18 December 2003 at 10:45 am -

- (a) Incentive scheme for hygiene improvement in licensed food premises; and
- (b) Control of import, sale and breeding of animals.

[*Post-meeting note* : Three other new items have been added to the agenda of the December meeting. Item (a) has been deferred to the Panel meeting in January 2004.]

II Information paper(s) issued since last meeting

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 330/03-04(01) & LC Paper No. IN 03/03-04(01)]

2. Members noted that, as requested at the meeting on 26 September 2003, the Administration has provided the following information -

- (a) the latest development and supply of "Ka-mei chicken";
- (b) the measures taken to maintain the hygiene and cleanliness of the country park areas and toilets therein; and
- (c) details of the proposed outsourcing of the management of selected barbecue sites in country parks.

3. The Chairman invited members to note that the Research and Library Services Division of the Legislative Council Secretariat had prepared an information note on "Genetically Modified Food Labelling in the European Union".

III Labelling scheme on nutrition information

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 407/03-04(03)]

4. At the invitation of the Chairman, Deputy Secretary (Food and Environmental Hygiene) (DS(FEH)) briefed members on the Administration's paper on the proposed nutrition labelling scheme. DS(FEH) said that the scheme would be implemented in two phases over a period of five years, to facilitate consumers' understanding of the nutrition information on pre-packaged food products and to standardise the format of nutrition information labels.

5. Consultant (Community Medicine) (Risk Assessment and Communication) (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department) (C(CM)) gave a power point presentation to explain the proposed nutrition labelling scheme. He outlined the purpose of the scheme, the relationship between diseases and nutrition, overseas experience on nutrition information labelling, factors of consideration in devising the scheme, the proposed requirements and implementation schedule.

Timetable for consultation and implementation

6. Dr LO Wing-lok said that the medical sector was in support of introducing the mandatory nutrition labelling scheme but considered that it took too long a time for the mandatory food labelling scheme to fully come into effect in year 2010. He further said that it was important to ensure sufficient complementing measures, and to educate the public about the importance of nutrition information labelling and how to comprehend nutrition information. He agreed that the format of nutrition information labels should be standardised to enable comparisons to be made between similar food products.

7. Mr LEUNG Fu-wah shared the view of Dr LO that the time for implementation of the mandatory nutrition information labelling was too long. He pointed out that the community was generally in support of mandatory nutrition information labelling. He did not agree that the trade would need five years to sell their existing stocks before they could comply with the new labelling requirements.

8. Mrs Selina CHOW said that the wholesale and retail trades did not oppose the mandatory nutrition information labelling, but they were concerned that there should be sufficient time for them to prepare for the implementation. She pointed out that many food products in Hong Kong were imported from other places, and importers had to rely on the overseas manufacturers in complying with the labelling requirements. With the proposed phased approach, the trades could have two years to assess whether there were operational difficulties during the voluntary labelling phase. She urged that the Administration should discuss the labelling requirements with the trade and conduct a "Regulation Impact Assessment" before implementing the mandatory labelling requirements. She added that the inclusion of nutrition information on food labels could be a marketing tool for food products.

Action

9. Mr Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan said that if Hong Kong imposed very stringent nutrition information labelling requirements or moved too fast in implementing such requirements, overseas food suppliers might give up the Hong Kong market which was relatively small. This would reduce the varieties of food for sale in Hong Kong. Mr CHEUNG suggested that the Panel should invite the food trade to give views on the Administration's proposal to ascertain whether the food trade had any difficulties in complying with the requirements.

10. Dr LO Wing-lok suggested that the medical associations and concerned parties should also be invited to give views to the Panel.

11. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked if the Government would consider extending the consultation period in order to gauge the views of the second term District Councils (DCs) which would come into operation in January 2004. The Chairman requested the Administration to discuss with the Home Affairs Department the consultation arrangements with the DCs. DS(FEH) agreed.

12. The Chairman proposed that a special meeting of the Panel be held on 2 February 2004 to invite deputations to give views on the proposed nutrition information labelling scheme. Members agreed.

Public education and publicity

13. As the proposed nutrition information labelling requirements were new to Hong Kong, Mr YEUNG Yiu-chung asked if the Administration would strengthen the publicity so that consumers would understand the nutrition information and the impact of food choices on their health.

14. DS(FEH) responded that the Administration would organise a series of public education programmes such as seminars to promote consumers' understanding of nutrition information. Deputy Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (DD(FEHD)) supplemented that as early as 2001, nutrition information had been uploaded onto the web site of FEHD, and leaflets and educational materials had also been distributed to schools.

15. Mr WONG Yung-kan suggested that there should be education programmes in schools on nutrition information. He urged the Administration to discuss with schools how to make the best use of the educational leaflets and compact disc on nutrition information. The Administration noted the suggestion.

[Post-meeting note : The Administration subsequently advised that a VCD on Nutrition Labelling had been produced jointly with Education Television and would be broadcast to secondary school students starting early 2004.]

Action

Labelling requirements and overseas practice

Admin

16. Mr Tommy CHEUNG requested the Administration to provide a comparison of the nutrition information labelling requirements in other countries and in the Mainland. Mr LEUNG Fu-wah requested that information on the origin of food imported by these countries/places be included where available. The Administration agreed to provide the information as far as possible.

17. DS(FEH) responded that overall speaking, Hong Kong lagged behind other countries as most of them had already implemented mandatory nutrition information labelling systems. However, the core nutrients to be included in the food labels in these countries might not be the same, depending on the situation of each country and the health conditions of its people. It would not be meaningful or appropriate to compare only the number of core nutrients included in these countries' food labelling systems. DS(FEH) added that in the case of Hong Kong, the Administration now proposed to include 10 items of nutrition information in the mandatory labelling system after five years. There were also adequate laboratory testing facilities in Hong Kong. As regards the situation in the Mainland, it was also actively considering enacting nutrition labelling legislation but the details were not available yet.

18. In response to Mr Tommy CHEUNG's enquiry, DS(FEH) said that the proposed exemption for food packed in a container of an aggregate surface area of less than 100 square centimetres was considered appropriate. DS(FEH) further said that the Administration would be pleased to discuss with the trade if it had difficulties in complying with the proposed requirements. The Administration would first have to ascertain the community preference before drawing up the implementation details and conducting assessments on the impact on the trade.

19. Mr LEUNG Fu-wah asked how the Administration would define food product and whether seasoning products would be included in the proposed labelling scheme. DD(FEHD) responded that under the proposed labelling scheme, flavourings would be exempted. However, the Administration would welcome views on the types of food that should or should not be exempted under the scheme.

20. Mrs Selina CHOW said that the wholesale and retail trades were of the view that Hong Kong should be on par with, instead of moving ahead of, other countries in introducing food labelling requirements. Mrs CHOW further said that many overseas countries had adopted different labelling requirements on nutrition information. If Hong Kong imposed too stringent labelling requirements, the importers/manufacturers might have to conduct laboratory tests for food products imported from these countries for sale in Hong Kong. This would lead to additional costs to the trade, and extra time had to be allowed for the laboratory tests especially if there were insufficient laboratory facilities in Hong Kong. She considered that the introduction of any such labelling requirements should have regard to the practical situation in Hong Kong, and food products which did not affect public health should be allowed to be imported to Hong Kong.

Action

21. The Chairman concluded that Members had diverse views on the proposed nutrition information labelling scheme. He said that the Democratic Party supported the Administration's proposal to bring all food nutrient declarations in line with the international standard. However, the Democratic Party was of the view that it took too long for the mandatory labelling scheme to come into operation after five years. He said that a special meeting of the Panel would be held on Monday, 2 February 2004 at 4:30 pm to listen to the views of the trade, the medical sector, Consumer Council and other concerned parties on the Administration's consultation paper.

IV Mercury level in seafood

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 407/03-04(04)]

22. The Chairman said that Mr WONG Yung-kan had raised the issue for discussion as there had been public concern about statements made by the Hong Kong Society of Clinical Metal Toxicology (HKSCMT) that people should not eat fish for more than three times a week because of the high level of mercury in some kinds of fish.

System for the Administration to make clarifications on issues of public concern

23. Mr LEUNG Fu-wah asked if the Administration had a system or procedure to make clarification on reports or statements made by some associations on food safety and public health issues which had aroused much public concern. He urged the Administration to adopt a pro-active approach in making clarifications on issues of wide public concern.

24. DS(FEH) said that the freedoms of expressions and academic research were respected in Hong Kong. Concerning the recent statement made by the HKSCMT about the level of mercury in seafood, the Hong Kong Medical Association had made public statements, and FEHD had responded to press enquires, to clarify recent findings of the level of mercury in seafood.

25. Mr WONG Yung-kan pointed out that the findings published by the HKSCMT in mid-November 2003 were based on a study completed eight years ago. While the findings of such study remained doubtful, the association's statement had adversely affected the seafood and catering businesses. He urged the Administration to clarify any inaccurate reports and statements published if a certain sector of the economy of Hong Kong would be affected.

26. Mr Tommy CHEUNG concurred with Mr WONG Yung-kan. He said that as the HKSCMT's findings also included shark fin and scallop, the catering business had been adversely affected. He supported the suggestion that FEHD should make prompt clarifications on misleading reports to safeguard the interests of the seafood and catering industries.

Action

27. DS(FEH) responded that FEHD had taken the initiative in this incident to make clarifications on the findings on the level of mercury in seafood. FEHD also had a regular food surveillance programme and the results were published on its web site regularly. The latest report, which was released in September 2003, found that the seafood in Hong Kong was generally safe for human consumption.

28. C(CM) supplemented that FEHD's food surveillance programme included the level of mercury in seafood. A study on the dietary exposure of local secondary students to heavy metals conducted by FEHD in 2002 revealed that the weekly estimated exposure of an average student to mercury was within the safety limit. However, children and pregnant women were advised not to consume excessive amount of predatory fish such as shark.

Admin

29. Mr Tommy CHEUNG asked if the Administration would approach the HKSCMT to find out the scientific basis of its findings concerning the level of mercury in seafood. DS(FEH) agreed to relay Mr CHEUNG's request to the Department of Health.

30. Mr WONG Yung-kan asked whether FEHD would consider publishing the results of their food studies and assessments on a quarterly basis. DS(FEH) responded that currently such study findings were published bi-annually. He would have to consider the resources available before committing to a more regular reporting system on food studies. However, he assured members that the existing food surveillance programme was sufficient to safeguard public health, and FEHD would make immediate clarification on misleading or inaccurate reports which had aroused much public concern.

Hot-line service

31. Dr LO Wing-lok said that the medical sector was very concerned about the safety of human consumption of seafood. Following the media reports on the HKSCMT's statements on the level of mercury in seafood, the Hong Kong Medical Association had taken the initiative to liaise with government departments to clarify such findings. He considered that being the authority to monitor food safety, the Administration had the responsibility to clarify misleading reports or statements made under the name of "professional" organisations. In view of the public concern about food safety matters, he suggested that the Administration should consider setting up a hot-line enquiry service for the public to find out correct and comprehensive information on food safety matters. DS(FEH) agreed to consider the suggestion.

Admin

V Conversion of aqua privies into flushing toilets

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 407/03-04(05)]

32. In response to the Chairman's query, DS(FEH) said that the funding proposal for converting aqua privies into flushing toilets would be submitted to the Public Works Subcommittee around June 2004.

Action

33. Mr WONG Yung-kan requested the Administration to provide information on the location of the 100 aqua privies to be converted into flushing toilets and asked whether the completion time could be shortened. DD(FEHD) responded that there were several factors to consider in estimating the project completion timeframe, such as the manpower and the complexity of projects. He said that three years would be a reasonable time to have 100 aqua privies converted to flushing toilets. Nevertheless, he would further discuss with the Architectural Services Department (ASD) whether the project completion time could be advanced.

34. Chief Project Manager (ASD) supplemented that ASD would try its best to expedite the conversion projects. However, he pointed out that there were technical problems in some conversion projects, such as land resumption and connection of sewage, and a longer time would be required.

35. Mr Tommy CHEUNG agreed that priority should be given to the aqua privies in tourist spots and those with a high utilisation rate. He asked whether the Administration would consider converting the remaining 400 aqua privies into flushing toilets, and whether the average or peak utilisation rate would be used in determining the priority of these projects. DD(FEHD) responded that FEHD would consider the utilisation over a certain time span during weekdays and holidays. He said that aqua privies which had an hourly usage rate of over 20 visits had already been included in the conversion programme. There was no plan to convert the remaining 400 aqua privies into flushing toilets at this stage having regard to their utilisation and effectiveness in resource deployment. However, upgrading of these privies might be possible by means of the public toilet improvement scheme.

36. The Chairman asked about the estimated costs for converting one aqua privy into flushing toilet. He also asked whether the foul smell problem would deteriorate if the underground septic tank was to be altered into a holding tank.

37. DD(FEHD) said that the estimated costs for one aqua privy would be around \$900,000 on the average. He explained that the scope of conversion works would include the construction of holding and water tanks, improvement of lighting and ventilation, and replacement of wall and floor finishes. ASD was also exploring a biological system that could be more effective in treating the sewage. The estimated cost for one conversion project would be in the region of \$900,000 to \$1.2 million. DD(FEHD) added that the foul smell problem would be improved with the installation of toilet bowl with flushing facility and the increase in desludging frequency from half yearly to two to three times a week.

38. In conclusion, the Chairman said that members generally supported the Administration's proposal of converting 100 aqua privies into flushing toilets. He requested the Administration to consider shortening the project completion time, and provide the list of the location of the 100 aqua privies to be converted into flushing toilets.

Action

VI Any other business

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 405/03-04(01)]

Health risks posed by wild doves and crows

39. Mr WONG Yung-kan proposed to discuss the health risks posed by wild doves and crows at a future Panel meeting. He said that these birds fouled the public areas, and being carrier of diseases, they might pose health risks to the community. The Chairman advised that the item be placed on the list of items to be discussed.

Admin

Duty visit to Japan

40. Members noted that the duty visit to Japan would be conducted from 15 to 21 January 2004.

41. There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 12:35 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
6 January 2004