

**For discussion
on 12 November 2003**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Discovery of *Vibrio Cholerae*
in the Live Fish Wholesale Market at the Aberdeen Promenade**

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the follow-up actions taken in respect of the recent discovery of *Vibrio cholerae* at the live fish wholesale market at the Aberdeen promenade and the progress of implementation of further control measures to promote fish tank water quality and seafood safety since the last discussion on the subject matter at the special meeting held on 16 September 2003.

BACKGROUND

2. At the meeting held on 16 September 2003, Members were briefed on the existing control and monitoring of seawater in fish tanks used for keeping of live seafood. The Administration also outlined a range of further control measures taken/to be taken to promote fish tank water quality and seafood safety in the short, medium and long term. The measures are as follows –

- (a) in the short term, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) would step up inspections to live fish wholesale and retail outlets for collection of water samples from fish tanks to ensure that the water quality is of an acceptable standard;
- (b) in the medium term, FEHD would implement a permit system to regulate the wholesale of seafood and the Fish Marketing Organisation (FMO) would assume management

responsibility for the live fish wholesale market operating at the public carpark at the Aberdeen promenade; and

- (c) in the long run, Health, Welfare and Food Bureau would review, in collaboration with FEHD and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), the existing legislative provisions and regulatory measures on seafood safety with a view to bringing the wholesale of seafood under the regulatory framework.

RECENT CASE OF VIBRIO CHOLERAE

3. As part of the programme for monitoring fish tank water quality, FEHD collects water samples regularly from the live fish wholesalers operating outside the FMO Wholesale Fish Market in Aberdeen. On 5 November 2003, a routine sample taken on 30 October 2003 from one of the stalls at the live fish wholesale market was found to contain *Vibrio cholerae* 01 El Tor serotype Ogawa, which is a highly infectious pathogen and injurious to health. The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene ordered on the same day the closure of the concerned premises under section 128C of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) on public health grounds.

4. During the execution of the closure order, a total of 154 kg of fish and other seafood items were confiscated and disposed of. Thorough disinfection was then carried out at the stall including the pontoon and the paraphernalia therein. Environmental swabs were also collected from the stall for laboratory analysis. The operator was informed of FEHD's intended prosecution for contravention of section 10A of the Food Business Regulation. FEHD staff would conduct daily visits to the premises to check whether the closure order is complied with. Following the recent case, FEHD also took fish tank water samples from the other 17 stalls at the location on 6 November 2003.

IMPLEMENTATION OF FURTHER CONTROL MEASURES TO PROMOTE FISH TANK WATER QUALITY AND SEAFOOD SAFETY

5. Since September 2003, FEHD carried out regular inspections to the live fish stalls at the Aberdeen promenade. In the wake of the recent incident, FEHD conducts daily visits to the location in order to monitor the situation closely.

6. In line with FEHD's routine surveillance programme for *Vibrio cholerae*, AFCD collects water samples from live fish wholesale stalls inside the FMO markets for *Vibrio cholerae* testing twice a year, of which one is taken between June and August. The first sampling took place in late August 2003 and no *Vibrio cholerae* was detected in the samples collected from the 12 fish stalls. In the light of the recent case at the live fish wholesale market at the Aberdeen promenade, AFCD has conducted an additional round of *Vibrio cholerae* testing on 10 November 2003 from the 12 stalls within FMO markets. Results will be available shortly.

7. Apart from routine meetings and contacts with the live fish stall operators in the FMO markets, AFCD and FMO staff convened in early September 2003 a special meeting with the operators reminding them of the importance of keeping the hygienic conditions of their stalls and water tanks and that they must use sources of clean seawater. Subsequently, another seminar was arranged in collaboration with FEHD in end September 2003 to introduce to the operators the technical requirements of filtration and disinfection systems. All the 12 live fish stallholders operating in the FMO markets have now installed filtration and disinfection systems. AFCD staff would continue to provide technical advice to the operators on matters relating to the installation and maintenance of these systems.

8. At the special meeting held on 16 September 2003, the Administration briefed Members that an inter-departmental working group had been set up to work on practicable means of regularising the live fish wholesale market at the Aberdeen promenade and a set of broad principles for the exercise had been drawn up.

9. Subsequently, the inter-departmental group consulted the Southern District Council (SDC) and the incumbent wholesalers on the scheme in mid-September and early October respectively. After securing support from the SDC and gathering views from the wholesalers, the inter-departmental group has been developing the details of the scheme for implementation as soon as practicable. In the light of the recent case of discovery of *Vibrio cholerae* at the market, AFCD has agreed to consider speeding up the process for the FMO to assume management responsibility for the market by the end of 2003.

10. After the recent case, AFCD and FEHD met with the incumbent wholesalers again on 6 November 2003. At the meeting, the wholesalers were asked to immediately stop using seawater from the Aberdeen Typhoon Shelter for their fish tanks and to obtain seawater from other suitable sources. They were also asked to install proper filtration and disinfection systems and to step up cleansing of their trading environment. The wholesale operators agreed to adopt the above-mentioned measures as soon as they could and to seek further technical advice from relevant government departments.

11. We will carry out the necessary minor works at the live fish wholesale market at the Aberdeen promenade. Upon completion of the works, the operators will be subject to FEHD's licensing control. Meanwhile, for the longer-term interest of protection of public health and seafood safety, we have embarked on a comprehensive review of the existing legislative provisions and regulatory measures with respect to surveillance, examination and sampling of seafood. We will consult the Panel on the review when more details are worked out.

12. In parallel, with the objective of further strengthening the control of cholera arising from the consumption of seafood, FEHD has recently formed an inter-departmental task force comprising experts from Department of Health, Environmental Protection Department, AFCD and FEHD to review and study the ecology of *Vibrio cholerae* in marine environment, in particular local waters with a view to gathering more scientific information that may be useful for better control of the quality of fish tank seawater. The task force has identified some data gaps in

the review. FEHD is now working on a conjoint study with relevant government departments aiming to examine the environmental determinants that may affect the distribution and seasonal change of *Vibrio cholerae* in local waters.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
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