

**For information
on 1 February 2005**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Inspection and Quarantine Measures for
Import of Potted Plants and Nursery Stock**

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the inspection and quarantine control on imported plants and the recent measures taken by the Administration to control red imported fire ants (*Solenopsis invicta* Buren) (herein after referred to as “red fire ants”) in Hong Kong.

Inspection and Quarantine Control of Imported Plants

2. At present, the importation of plants is regulated under the Plant (Importation and Pest Control) Ordinance (Cap.207). Cap.207 empowers the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DAFC) to control the importation of plants¹, plant pests and soil for the prevention and control of pests and other related matters.

3. Under Cap.207, any plant imported into Hong Kong must be accompanied by a Plant Import Licence issued by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and a valid Phytosanitary Certificate issued by the competent authority in its place of origin. Additional requirements are imposed on specified plants which present greater pest risks.

4. Importation of the following plants, however, do not require a Plant Import Licence:-

- Cut flowers;
- Fruit and vegetables for consumption;
- Grains, pulses, seeds and spices for human or animal consumption or for industrial use;
- Timber and timber products including rattan and bamboo;
- Dried tobacco and manufactured articles incorporating dried leaves; and

¹ Plant includes timber, trees, shrubs, leaves, roots, flowers, fruits, tubers, bulbs, corms, stocks, cuttings, layers, slips, suckers, seeds and any part of a plant whether or not intended for growing, planting or propagation or from which further plants may be grown, planted or propagated.

- Plants produced in and imported from the Mainland.

5. Moreover, no person shall import any plant pest or soil (including earth, sand, clay and peat) except under an authorization issued by AFCD. Soil imported from the Mainland is exempted from the requirement.

Notification System between Hong Kong and the Mainland

6. There is an established channel for communication between Hong Kong and the Mainland on plant inspection and quarantine issues.

7. Upon receiving reports by the trade on 17 January 2005 that potted plants aimed for delivery to Hong Kong for the Lunar New Year were stranded in Guangdong, the Administration had immediately activated the notification system to enquire the situation with the relevant inspection and quarantine authorities in the Mainland. We learned that the relevant Mainland authorities had stepped up their inspection and quarantine measures of potted plants and nursery stock for supply to Hong Kong as a matter of quality control.

8. On 24 January 2005, the Administration received notification from the People's Government of Shenzhen Municipality that red fire ants were found in Wuchuan of Zhanjiang in Guangdong. Red fire ants are regarded as imported harmful pests. Therefore, the Shenzhen Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureau had activated its emergency measures and acted in accordance with the law to strengthen the control on plants for export to Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the relevant Mainland authorities have increased their manpower and speeded up the inspection and quarantine procedures and adopted measures to facilitate the clearance of potted plants for supply to Hong Kong without compromising safety and quality control.

9. The Administration has since discussed the matter with the relevant Mainland authorities and both sides agreed to further improve and strengthen the existing communication mechanism.

Measures to Control Red Fire Ants

10. Having regard to the recent discovery of imported red fire ants in Hong Kong, the Administration has implemented the following emergency measures:

- (a) The Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food has established an interdepartmental action group to coordinate work and efforts of different

departments in the fight against the red fire ants. To draw up a total picture on the extent of possible spread of red fire ants in the territory, a large number of staff from the concerned Government Departments would be deployed to inspect areas under their management, especially in areas with recent planting, and look out for traces of red fire ants. For example, more than 800 estate management staff of the Housing Department have been mobilized to step up daily inspection of public rental housing estates, including flower beds, flower pots and potted plants with special focus on new vegetation areas. Notices have also been put up at estate offices and announcements made to remind tenants to spray pesticides or ask for help from estate offices if any traces of red fire ants are found. Cleansing and pest control personnel under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department in the field would stay alert of red fire ants in public places when carrying out their daily duties. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has mobilized staff to carry out search in planting areas, lawns, and nursing stocks at the Department's parks, gardens, nurseries, tree banks and the roadside amenity areas. Besides, LCSD will also conduct thorough inspections on all purchased plants upon delivery. The Environment, Transport and Works Bureau has issued instruction to the relevant Works Departments, requiring them to urgently inspect their work sites and in-house installations for any possible importation or establishment of red fire ants. In this regard, Works Departments, such as the Highways Department, the Civil Engineering and Development Department, Drainage Services Department, Architectural Services Department, etc., have alerted their staff, contractors and consultants to look out for suspected cases during their daily site inspections of construction sites, roadside slopes, landscape areas, newly planted areas, depots, treatment plants, nurseries, etc. The Works Departments will also alert their contractors that the soil used for landscaping works must be from proper sources and free of red fire ants. Apart from mobilising staff to patrol areas under their management, the Home Affairs Department has instructed their contractors with ongoing minor works contracts to inspect all their works sites. Village Representatives have also been invited to carry out surveys in their villages. AFCD has mobilised a 300-strong team to patrol all country parks and inspect all local nurseries. Any suspected ant mounds found will be eradicated promptly.

- (b) The Department of Health (DH) has provided health advice on stings by red fire ants in its websites and via the 24-hour Health Education Hotline. Health advice has also been incorporated into publicity leaflets. The Centre for Health Protection has also liaised with the Hospital Authority to alert the Accident and Emergency Departments of public hospitals and their general out-patient clinics on the matter. Further, DH has written to all doctors in Hong Kong to alert them of the possible attendance of victims of red imported fire ant stings and to report to AFCD, if necessary.
- (c) Specimens of suspected red imported fire ant have been sent to experts in Japan,

United Kingdom and the Mainland for identification. Mainland's experts confirmed on 29 January 2005 that the specimen of ants that had been submitted for their examination was red fire ants.

- (d) AFCD has collected information on a host of special pesticides for killing red fire ants. A long-term strategy is now being worked out with reference to overseas experience. AFCD will also monitor the possible impacts that the use of pesticides may have on the environment, including the level of pesticide residue in the aquatic areas of the Hong Kong Wetland Park. No abnormalities have been detected so far.
- (e) Travellers have been advised not to bring potted plants into Hong Kong. The Customs and Excise Department has stepped up inspection of travellers bringing potted plants at boundary crossings. AFCD has also allocated staff at the boundary crossing gateways to inspect trucks carrying plants bearing soil for import into Hong Kong. Plants imported will be inspected in the nurseries or at the Ta Kwu Ling Government Farm.
- (f) AFCD has advised all local farmers to stay vigilant in monitoring pest conditions in their farms and report traces of red fire ants.
- (g) Publicity pamphlets about red fire ants have been produced to inform the public what to do if they identify suspected cases. Health advice on stings by red fire ants is also included in the advisory. The pamphlets will be distributed widely through schools, district offices and housing estates. Posters and Announcements in the Public Interest (APIs) are also being prepared to reinforce public education.

PEST SITUATION

11. Red fire ants originate in South America and may travel long distance in soil or plants with roots and soil attached. The pest was introduced to the southern part of United States in the 1920s, Australia in 2001, Taiwan in 2003 and Guangdong at the end of 2004. Red fire ants are aggressive insects and will attack wildlife or human when disturbed.

12. The probability of developing severe allergic reactions to stings by red fire ants is slim. In most cases, stings by red fire ants will cause painful, burning and itching sensation and form blisters on the skin. Tendered properly, the wound will usually heal in 10 to 14 days. On rare occasions, the stings can cause severe acute allergic reaction which can be fatal.

13. After red fire ants were found in the Hong Kong Wetland Park, the pest

was also found in Yeung Uk Tsuen in Yuen Long, Sheung Yue River in Sheung Shui, the Hong Kong International Airport, Tai Kok Tsui, West Kowloon Cultural District and Kam Ho Road near KCRC West Rail Depot. All mounds have been appropriately treated.

14. As of 30 January 2005, no suspected red imported fire ant mounds were found by AFCD staff during their patrol of the recreational sites and hiking trails in the country parks. Also, no abnormalities were detected in the imported potted plants and local nurseries during AFCD's inspection.

WAY FORWARD

15. The Administration would closely monitor the developments and review appropriate response actions as necessary. We will continue to maintain close liaison with the relevant Mainland authorities on the matter. Meanwhile, we will also conduct a review on our existing legislation on plant regulations.

ADVICE SOUGHT

16. Members are requested to note the measures set out in the above paragraphs.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
January 2005