

Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Meeting on 26 October 2004 at 4:30 p.m.

Speaking Note for SHWF

- I am pleased to attend the first meeting of the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene for the current legislative session. Today, I would like to briefly outline our work plan in the area of food and environmental hygiene for the 2004/05 legislative session.
- As food safety and environmental hygiene can have significant impacts on public health, we consider that public health protection should always take precedence in our policy actions. We are thus firmly committed to assuring the safety and quality of our food and providing quality environmental hygiene services to achieve a clean environment for our community.
- In the past few days, there have been media reports about the food incidents concerning ciguatera poisoning, dyed sweet potatoes and fish and other foodstuff which may cause public concern on food safety. I would like to re-assure Members that we are very concerned about such incidents and are currently looking into ways and means of tackling the problem.
- Generally speaking, the FEHD is empowered by the existing legislation to take enforcement actions where the food concerned is unfit for human consumption. However, in cases where there is no direct or immediate evidence to prove that the food is unfit for human consumption, e.g. where the food may contain ingredients exceeding the statutory requirements, the FEHD has no powers to seize the items for inspection or order an immediate recall.

- In the recent case of dyed sweet potatoes, notwithstanding the limitations of our existing regulatory regime, we have been able to respond swiftly to public concern on food safety by tracing the origin of the sweet potatoes and are currently discussing with the Mainland authorities on how to resolve the problem. In the longer term, we are examining the feasibility of establishing a mandatory food recall system so as to enable us to better respond to public concerns on food items which may pose a risk to public health.
- In responding to the increasing incidents of ciguatera poisoning, it is important that we should put into place as quickly as possible various control measures to reduce the risk of food poisoning. I have asked DFEH to look into the feasibility of introducing regulations to prohibit the import and sale of certain species of fish that carry a higher risk of ciguatera poisoning.
- In the 2004/05 legislative session, we will focus our work on the following major issues:

1. Prevention and Control of Avian Influenza

Following the outbreaks of avian influenza in the Mainland in January 2004 and, in the light of the recurrence of avian influenza outbreaks in the region, we have reviewed the risk management of live poultry in Hong Kong and concluded that we should reduce the total live chicken population in Hong Kong in order to curb the risk of an epidemic outbreak. We are currently maintaining a level of imports of live chickens at 30,000 a day and we hope to maintain an equivalent number from local chicken farms, having regard to the potential health risk posed by large quantities of live poultry in our markets. We will closely monitor the avian influenza outbreak situation in the region and review

our position accordingly.

We have also completed the public consultation exercise on the long term strategy to minimise the risk of human infection by avian influenza in July this year. By the end of the consultation period, we received over 10,000 submissions / signatures. We are still analysing these submissions at the moment, and we plan to report the results of the public consultation exercise to this Panel around December 2004 / January 2005.

2. Review on the existing food safety regulatory regime

Our strategy is to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach in food chain management (i.e. the implementation of the “From Feed to Table” concept (從飼養到餐桌) by putting in place the necessary infrastructure; a coherent, effective and dynamic food policy on the basis of scientific evidence and risk analysis (e.g. drawing up standards and ensuring compliance through enforcement); and to enhance private-public partnership and participation by stakeholders during the process.

The existing policy objective of our food safety regulatory regime (食物安全規管架構) is to ensure that food products are hygienic, safe and fit for human consumption. The emphasis is therefore placed on control measures that would prevent harmful substances from entering into the food chain. However, health and food are inextricably linked because food is an essential ingredient for good health. There is therefore a need for us to constantly review our regulatory framework so that individuals are encouraged to observe healthy life styles, to develop healthy eating habits and a balanced diet and to take more responsibility through

self-education on food safety and nutrition value as consumers. This would help towards the sustainability of an equitable, efficient, cost-effective, accessible and quality health care systems. In the meanwhile, recent food incidents in the Mainland have highlighted the weakness of our present system. Our immediate aim is therefore to review our food safety regulatory regime to take into account the best international practices so that it will continue to maintain its relevance in our public health protection and enhancement.

3. *Nutrition Labelling*

On nutrition labelling (營養標籤), it is necessary to secure public support, including that of the LegCo and the trade, in implementing the proposed scheme. We have completed a consultation exercise on the proposed nutrition labelling scheme earlier this year and we are currently conducting a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) (規管影響評估) on the overall costs and benefits of introducing a nutritional labelling scheme in Hong Kong. We will take into consideration the views collected during the public consultation exercise and the results of the RIA before finalising the way forward. Our plan is to report to this Panel on the results of the public consultation exercise and the RIA around March / April 2005.

4. *Ciguatera Poisoning and Fish Tank Water*

As I mentioned earlier on, apart from considering new regulations to control the problem, we are also discussing with the trade the promulgation of a set of voluntary code of practice to encourage industry self-regulation on the import and distribution of live marine fish to

resolve the problem of ciguatera poisoning. If the voluntary code of practice fails to achieve any appreciable results, we will then consider the introduction of legislation to regulate live marine fish. Separately, we are now drafting regulations to prohibit the use of seawater from specific locations for the purpose of keeping live seafood. In the meanwhile, we are also pursuing with professional organisations the feasibility of introducing a voluntary accreditation scheme for the registration of seawater suppliers.

5. *Prevention of vector-borne diseases*

Arising from our efforts to combat the problem of Dengue Fever, we have identified certain weaknesses in our existing legislation to deal with the issue. For example, the FEHD has no powers to require the building management companies to take actions to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds, to place Ovitrap in the common parts of a private building and to take immediate remedial actions in private premises. We will therefore introduce legislative amendments to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (公眾衛生及市政條例)(Cap. 132) in the current legislative session for more effective control of the mosquito breeding problem. We shall brief the Panel on the legislative proposal by the end of 2004.

6. *Licensed food premises*

To ensure that local consumers and tourists alike have an enjoyable and safe dining experience, we are keen to enhance the hygiene standards of all food premises on a sustainable basis. On this score, we will continue to improve the state of cleanliness of licensed food premises by such

measures as introducing an open categorization scheme (食肆分級制), revamping the demerit points system (違例扣分制) and tightening up the licensing requirements for food factories (食物製造廠). To facilitate the trade, FEHD will keep under review the licensing regime for food business and streamline licensing requirements/conditions where appropriate.

7. *Fisheries Protection (Amendment) Bill*

Food and environmental hygiene aside, we are also mindful of the need to promote sustainable development of the fishing industry and to conserve fisheries resources in Hong Kong. To achieve this objective, we plan to put in place measures such as establishing fishing license programme (捕魚牌照制度) and fisheries protection areas (漁業保護區), as well as introducing an annual territory-wide “closed-season” for fishing in Hong Kong (每年一度全港性“休漁期”). In the light of the Panel’s general support for the legislative exercise on the subject when consulted in September last year, we will introduce legislative amendments to the Fisheries Protection Ordinance (漁業保護條例) (Cap. 171) in the current legislative session.

8. *Review on the regulatory framework for live marine fish*

There is at present no legislative provision to enable us to regulate live marine fish. We will therefore conduct a review to see if the present regulatory framework for the control of animals and birds could be extended to cover live marine fish.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- We have been working in close partnership with the LegCo and the community in assuring the safety and quality of our food and providing quality environmental hygiene services. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Members for the support they have rendered to us in the past year. Effective protection for public health can only be achieved through the concerted actions from all parties, collaboration across sectors and shared responsibilities between the sectors and the general public. We look forward to your continued support in our new policy initiatives to enhance food safety and improve environmental hygiene in Hong Kong in the coming year and beyond.
- I will be pleased to answer any questions that Members may have on our proposed work plan for the coming year.
- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.