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**Meeting of Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
on 26 October 2004**

Background Brief prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

Ciguatera Poisoning Incidents

Purpose

This paper summarises the discussions by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on measures to address the problem of ciguatera poisoning.

Past outbreaks

2. According to the information provided by the Administration, there were 75 reported cases of ciguatera poisoning with 233 people affected during the period from 2000 to 2003. In the first three months in 2004, there were 25 ciguatera poisoning cases with 100 persons affected.

Previous discussions by the Panel

3. From 28 March to 31 March 2004, there were 16 incidents of ciguatera fish poisoning. In view of the increasing number of cases, the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene held a meeting on 2 April 2004 to discuss with the Administration the monitoring and control system on ciguatera and preventive measures.

4. At the meeting on 2 April 2004, members expressed concern whether the problematic coral fish came from one single supplier or from a new fishing area. They urged the Administration to identify the source of the toxic fish and to require coral fish to undergo ciguatoxin testing prior to importation.

5. The Administration advised that it was difficult to trace the source of coral fish as they were not confined to particular places. At present, there was no legislation regulating the landing of live marine fish in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) had advised the trade that coral fish from new fishing areas should be checked for ciguatoxin prior to importation to Hong Kong, and FEHD would conduct random sampling tests on ciguatoxin. The Administration also informed the Panel that it was reviewing the existing legislation to extend regulatory control to live fish. Concrete proposals would be put forward to the Panel in three to four months.

6. Pending the completion of the Administration's review, the Panel urged the Administration to take interim measures to improve the situation and to actively discuss with the trade the following suggestions –

- (a) requiring ciguatoxin tests of coral fish coming from new fishing areas prior to importation; and
- (b) strengthening the voluntary reporting system and sampling requirements for coral reef fish.

Some members also urged the Administration to strengthen public education on prevention of ciguatera poisoning, in particular how to differentiate marine fish from cultured fish as the latter was safe to eat.

7. The Administration subsequently informed the Panel, at the meeting on 13 July 2004, the proposed measures to enhance the monitoring and control system on ciguatera. The Administration advised that it would adopt a two-phased approach to address the problem of ciguatera poisoning at an early stage. As it took time to review the existing legislation to improve the regulatory control, a voluntary Code of Practice would be developed in the meantime. Under the Code of Practice, the fish traders would be required to provide information on each lot of fish catch.

8. At the Panel meeting, some members expressed concern whether the fish traders would have difficulties in complying with the proposed reporting system. The Administration advised that the information to be reported was not complicated, and the fish traders were aware that any ciguatera poisoning cases would adversely affect their business. Moreover, the Administration would develop the Code of Practice in consultation with the fish trading industry.

9. Hon WONG Yung-kan informed the Panel that the fishing trade supported advance ciguatera testing of the fish catches prior to importation and strengthening the reporting of fish catches to FEHD. A few other members preferred a compulsory reporting system to provide more reliable information

and effective control over imported fish. However, Hon Tommy CHEUNG did not support enacting more legislation to regulate and control commercial activities.

10. The Panel requested the Administration to further discuss with the fish traders the voluntary Code of Practice. Members also suggested that –

- (a) more sample tests be conducted on coral fish catches, particularly large fishes and those from new fishing grounds, prior to their importation to Hong Kong;
- (b) consignments involving a large quantity of fish or large fish exceeding a certain weight should be subject to ciguatera testing prior to importation; and
- (c) the Administration should strengthen public education on prevention of ciguatera poisoning.

The Administration has undertaken to report to the Panel one year after the implementation of the Code.

Recent development

11. As there was a cluster of ciguatera poisoning cases in September 2004, the Panel will further discuss with the Administration at its meeting on 26 October 2004 the remedial actions taken by the Administration and the trade as well as the control measures to prevent recurrence of such incidents.

Relevant papers

12. A list of relevant papers and documents is in the Appendix for members' easy reference. The papers and documents are available on the Research and Library Services Information System and the Council's website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk/english/index.htm>.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
21 October 2004

Appendix

Relevant Papers/Documents

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Papers/Motion Passed/Council Question</u>
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	2 April 2004	Administration's paper - Paper No. CB(2) 1923/03-04(01) Minutes of meeting [LC Paper No. CB(2) 2777/03-04]
	13 July 2004	Administration's paper - Paper No. CB(2) 3051/03-04(01) Minutes of meeting [LC Paper No. CB(2)3271/03-04]