

立法會
Legislative Council

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LC Paper No. CB(2)188/06-07
(This notes of meeting have been
seen by the Administration)

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Notes of Informal Meeting
held on Monday, 24 July 2006, at 10:45 am
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building

- Members present** : Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP (Chairman)
Hon WONG Yung-kan, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, JP
Dr Hon KWOK Ka-ki
- Member attending** : Hon WONG Kwok-hing, MH
- Members absent** : Hon Bernard CHAN, GBS, JP
Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon Vincent FANG Kang, JP
Dr Hon Joseph LEE Kok-long, JP
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
- Public officers attending** : Mrs Carrie YAU
Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Food and Environmental Hygiene)
- Miss Vivian KO
Principal Assistant Secretary
(Food and Environmental Hygiene) Special Duties
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
- Dr S P MAK
Controller, Centre for Food Safety
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Clerk in : Miss Betty MA
Attendance Senior Council Secretary (2)1

Staff in : Ms Anna CHEUNG
Attendance Legislative Assistant (2)5

Action

I Follow-up discussion on the work of the Centre for Food Safety

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 2812/05-06(01)]

[LC Paper No. CB(2) 2663/05-06(01)]

As a quorum could not be formed within 15 minutes of the time appointed for the meeting, members agreed that an informal meeting should be held for the Administration to brief members on the work of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS).

2. Controller/CFS took members briefly through the Administration's paper detailing the work of CFS with emphasis on the areas of enhanced work and new initiatives. Controller/CFS said that CFS adopted a risk analysis framework promulgated by the World Health Organization on ensuring food safety in Hong Kong. The framework entailed risk management, risk assessment and risk communication.

3. Mr Tommy CHEUNG noted that CFS would recruit some additional 60 new staff, but only 2 000 additional food samples would be taken for testing in 2006. He said that the public had expected CFS to enhance its work on food surveillance and sampling, but the current targets for food sampling was disproportionate to the additional manpower resources. Mr CHEUNG further said that while he understood that recruitment of additional staff had just started and the new staff would only be able to assume duty in late 2006 the earliest, CFS should have worked out the deployment of additional staff in 2007-08. He asked about the staff deployment for collecting food samples before and after the establishment of CFS.

4. Controller/CFS responded that the 2 000 additional samples to be collected in 2006 were estimated based on the existing resources of both CFS and the Government Laboratory. The additional staff to be recruited would not only be deployed to collect food samples, but also to deal with the increasing number of food complaints and safety control of imported food at border. As for food sample collection, Controller/CFS said that it was anticipated that a total of 63 000 samples would be collected in 2006-07. As for the target for 2007-08, it would be worked out later the year in the light of additional resources available. She added that any increase in food sample collection would need a corresponding increase in laboratory support for conducting testing.

Action

5. Mr Tommy CHEUNG considered it unacceptable that Controller/CFS was unable to provide targets for food sampling in 2007-08 onwards. In his view, the number of additional food samples to be collected in 2006-07 was far below expectation. He urged that more food surveillance and sampling should be conducted by CFS.

6. Mr WONG Kwok-hing shared a similar view with Mr Tommy CHEUNG. Mr WONG expressed dissatisfaction that only 2 000 additional samples would be collected for testing after some 60 additional staff were recruited. Given that the number of food complaint cases had increased by two-fold in 2005 as compared with that in 2004. The public had expected that CFS would enhance food surveillance by conducting more food sample testing. Mr WONG asked whether the Administration had any plan to bid for additional resources for conducting more food surveillance and sampling.

7. Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Food and Environmental Hygiene) (PS(FEH)) advised that about 70 additional staff would be recruited to work in CFS. Of these new staff, 10 would be deployed for food sampling and 14 for handling food complaint cases. She envisaged that consequent to the enhanced risk communication to the public, CFS would receive more food complaint cases. PS(FEH) stressed that any increase in food sample collection would need a corresponding increase in laboratory support for conducting testing. The Administration would take into account members' views on work priorities of CFS, and would revert to the Panel when the targets for 2007-08 were worked out.

8. Mr WONG Kwok-hing maintained the view that it was Government's responsibility to formulate a comprehensive food safety regulatory framework to better protect public health. He urged the Administration to critically review the work priorities of CFS, with a view to conducting more food surveillance and sample testing.

9. PS(FEH) said that the Administration had put forward an reorganisation plan to enhance the food safety regulatory framework a few months ago. Since there were divergent views on the proposed reorganisation plan, the Administration had revised its proposal in that CFS would be set up within the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) as the next step in enhancing food safety. She stressed that the Administration would fully take into account members' views when conducting an overall review of the food safety regulatory framework.

10. Responding to the Chairman, PS(FEH) said that the staff establishment of CFS was worked out based on the resources needed for conducting regular food surveillance programme. Additional staff would be deployed for dealing with food poisoning outbreaks and other food safety incidents when necessary.

Action

11. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that the setting up of CFS expectedly would help improve the food regulatory framework. He requested the Administration to elaborate the changes or improvements that had been brought about in the following areas –

- (a) food sample collection and testing to enhance the safety of seasonal food products;
- (b) enforcement of the new requirement of labelling of allergens which would come into effect in July 2007;
- (c) food safety control at source in respect of audit visits to food animal farms and food processing plants in the Mainland, as well as safety of vegetables supplied by unregistered farms in the Mainland;
- (d) safety of shellfish and aquatic products during transportation, and the introduction of legislation to regulate the food safety of aquatic products; and
- (e) the role of the proposed Expert Committee on Food Safety and the delineation of work between the Expert Committee and the existing Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene.

12. Controller/CFS made the following responses –

- (a) food sample collection and testing for seasonal food products was covered under the regular food surveillance programme;
- (b) recruitment and deployment of the additional staff in CFS had taken into account the need for enforcement of the new requirement of labelling of allergens;
- (c) to enhance food safety control at source, CFS would step up liaison with the Mainland authorities to ensure safety of imported food;
- (d) the Administration was reviewing the regulatory mechanism for aquatic food products and would need to strike a balance between safeguarding public health and facilitating the trade; and
- (e) the proposed Expert Committee on Food Safety would comprise members from the food business trades and consumer groups, academics, professionals, food and other experts. The Committee would focus its discussion on specific food safety issues, such as formulating food safety measures and reviewing food safety standards, whereas the Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene would advise the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food at policy level.

Action

13. Mr WONG Yung-kan urged that CFS should expedite the formulation of the food safety standards and requirements for imported food to better protect public health. PS(FEH) responded that the Administration would make reference to international food safety standards, notably those developed by Codex Alimentarius Commission, to ensure safety of imported food. She added that CFS would review and update food legislation from time to time. For instance, CFS was considering an overhaul of the Preservatives in Food Regulations to allow the trade more choice of preservatives to be used in food.

14. Dr KWOK Ka-ki said that the establishment of CFS was responding to the strong call from the community to better protect public health following the occurrence of a series of food incidents, particularly after the discovery of malachite green in freshwater fish. In this connection, he considered that CFS should focus its work on risk management. While he did not object to enhancing food surveillance, CFS should strengthen the professional support for keeping up with the latest development in international food standards and prevention of food incidents. Dr KWOK further said that CFS should demonstrate the changes brought about to the food safety regulatory framework after its establishment. Dr KWOK noted that CFS would recruit additional staff including food scientists, statistician, food chemists and science laboratory technicians in 2006-07. He asked about the respective numbers and rank of the professional staff to be recruited and whether overseas candidates would be considered for the posts.

15. PS(FEH) said that the professionalism of food experts in CFS were internationally recognised. Citing the discovery of malachite green in freshwater fish as an example, PS(FEH) said that some overseas counterparts had expressed their appreciation for the transparent approach adopted by the Administration in dealing with the food incident, which facilitated them to take timely actions in their countries. She added that the Administration had not introduced legislation to regulate the presence of malachite green in fish in the past simply because the substance had been banned for use in food fish.

16. On the recruitment of additional professional staff in food safety to work in CFS, Controller/CFS said that CFS planned to recruit six professional staff (i.e. five scientific officers, and one food safety officer pitched at senior professional rank on contract term who must possess over 10 years relevant experience in the field. Advertisements for the vacancies had been placed in Hong Kong and overseas. Controller/CFS further said that as the Expert Committee on Food Safety would comprise professionals and food experts, CFS would also seek the professional support and advice from the Expert Committee in the formulation of food safety measures, review of food safety standards in the light of international practices, trends and developments.

17. Dr KWOK Ka-ki considered that in making reference to international best practices, the Administration should consider appointing professionals or food experts from overseas on a short-term contract basis to strengthen the professional and expert

Action

support for CFS. PS(FEH) said that the Administration would consider Dr KWOK's suggestion bearing in mind that food experts should understand the local food market and be able to communicate with the Mainland authorities to deal with food safety matters that might have cross-border implications.

18. Noting that CFS would conduct only 35 audit visits of farms in the Mainland in 2006, the Chairman expressed concern about the effectiveness of such visits in ensuring food safety at source. The Chairman then referred to the Annex to the Administration's paper and asked whether the additional CFS staff to be recruited was reflected under the "Food Safety and Public Health" programme area.

19. Controller/CFS explained that CFS would conduct 35 regular audit visits of farms exporting food animals to Hong Kong as compared with 20 such visits conducted by FEHD in 2005. CFS would also conduct ad hoc visits of farms exporting food animals and freshwater fish farms when necessary. Controller/CFS stressed that conducting visits of Mainland farms could by no means replace the monitoring and inspection role played by the Mainland authorities. On the additional staffing for CFS, Controller/CFS said that the Annex to the Administration's paper showed that apart from staffing responsible for food safety and public health, the overall establishment of FEHD had decreased between 2003-04 and 2005-06. About 73 additional staff to be recruited in 2006-07 would be deployed to work in CFS for carrying out risk management, risk assessment and risk communication.

20. Responding to Mr Tommy CHEUNG, Controller/CFS said that after the establishment of CFS, Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) was responsible for the regulation of local agriculture and fisheries farms, and inspection of food premises was not conducted by CFS but staff in another division of the FEHD.

21. Mr Tommy CHEUNG said that the public had expected that CFS would enhance its work on food sampling and control at source after its establishment. He considered that the regulation of local agriculture and fisheries product and food safety control at source, which was currently performed by AFCD, should be put under CFS. Mr CHEUNG pointed out that following the introduction of voluntary surrender of licences/tenancies scheme for the poultry traders and the voluntary surrender of licences scheme for pig farmers, it was envisaged that the workload of AFCD would reduce. He asked whether consideration would be given to redeploying the "surplus" staff in AFCD to CFS to enhance food safety control at source. Mr CHEUNG further asked about the long-term plan for the food safety regulatory framework, given that the Administration had proposed to split up AFCD in its original reorganisation proposal.

22. PS(FEH) responded that the Administration had undertaken to conduct an overall review of the food safety regulatory framework when submitting the funding approval to the Finance Committee. In this connection, as part of the overall review, the Administration would review the staffing of AFCD after the closing date of

Action

applications for the voluntary surrender schemes for poultry and pig farmers, and would revert to the Panel when a comprehensive plan for the food safety regulatory framework was available.

23. The Chairman added that the Panel would follow up the comprehensive plan for the food safety regulatory framework at future meetings.

24. Mr WONG Yung-kan said that veterinarians played a key role in ensuring food safety control at source. He recalled that when the Panel discussed the reorganisation plan for food safety regulatory framework, members strongly requested the Administration to increase the number of veterinarians to enhance food safety control at source. He expressed dissatisfaction that the Administration was still unable to provide the number of additional veterinarian posts to be created in CFS. Mr WONG further asked whether Mainland veterinarians would be eligible for the new veterinary officer posts in CFS having regard to the fact that most of agriculture and fisheries products sold at local market were imported from the Mainland.

25. PS(FEH) stressed that the role of veterinary officers in enhancing food safety would not be neglected. As CFS had just come into operation for about two months, the Administration would review the staffing requirement for CFS at a later stage. Controller/CFS added that there were six serving veterinary officers (three on permanent establishment and three on contract terms) in CFS. Approval had been given to create three new permanent veterinary officer posts in CFS, and recruitment was in progress to fill these three new posts.

26. As regards the recruitment of veterinarians from the Mainland, Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Food and Environmental Hygiene) (Special Duties) said that Mainland veterinarians did not meet the qualification for registration as a registered veterinary surgeon in Hong Kong, and the Veterinary Surgeons Board of Hong Kong was reviewing the qualification for registration as a registered veterinary surgeon.

27. Mr WONG Kwok-hing said that according to recent findings of Greenpeace, residues of banned pesticides were found in a number of vegetables samples obtained from retail outlets of the two major supermarket chains, and these vegetables were supplied by unregistered farms in the Mainland. Mr WONG further said that a labelling system for vegetables supplied by registered farms in the Mainland had been introduced in 1990s. Mr WONG asked about the specific actions taken by CFS to ensure that vegetables sold at supermarkets were supplied by registered farms in the Mainland and sold with labels.

28. Controller/CFS said that CFS had met with representatives of supermarket chains and requested them to ensure that vegetables sold at local supermarkets should be supplied by registered farms in the Mainland and put in place an effective tracing system for the suppliers of vegetables. She believed that operators of supermarket chains would observe the arrangement to maintain good reputation of business.

Action

Controller/CFS further said that there was currently no legislation regulating the import of vegetables, the system for supply of vegetables from registered farms was an administrative arrangement with the Mainland authorities, and selling vegetables from farms not registered with the Mainland authorities per se was not an offence.

29. Mr WONG Kwok-hing considered that the Administration should introduce legislation to regulate the supply of vegetables from registered farms in the Mainland in order to protect public health. PS(FEH) said that the Administration would need to strike a balance between safeguarding public health and facilitating the trade. As the existing monitoring mechanism was effective, the Administration did not see the need to introduce legislation at the present stage. Mr WONG Kwok-hing expressed dissatisfaction that the Administration failed to take actions to address the problem of vegetables from unregistered farms being sold at local market. He would urge the Panel to follow up the issue at the next session.

30. Mr WONG Kwok-hing noted that the establishment for programme area of “Public Education and Community Involvement” had reduced from 42 in 2003-04 to 27 in 2006-07. He asked how CFS was going to enhance its work on risk communication. Mr WONG said that to promote public awareness on food safety, the two former municipal councils had launched food safety educational programmes in schools by appointing students as food safety ambassadors. He strongly requested the Administration to reintroduce similar educational programmes in schools.

31. Controller/CFS explained that the reduction of staff for the programme area of “Public Education and Community Involvement” was resulted from the implementation of efficiency savings measures. FEHD would continue to promote food safety. CFS would also conduct workshops and seminars, including visits to schools, to increase the awareness of the public on food safety.

32. PS(FEH) added that the Administration attached great importance to public health. She believed that educational programmes and campaigns similar to the former food safety ambassador programmes were being launched in schools to promote food safety.

II Any other business

33. The meeting ended at 12:45 pm.