

**For discussion
on 24 July 2006**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Work of the Centre for Food Safety

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the work of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) established under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) with emphasis on the areas of enhanced work and new initiatives.

Food Safety Control Framework

2. The CFS adopts a risk analysis framework promulgated by the World Health Organization on ensuring food safety in Hong Kong. This framework entails risk management, risk assessment and risk communication.

Risk Management

3. Risk management consists of several main components, namely food surveillance, control of imported food and food animals, management of food incidents and enforcing food safety legislation. The CFS adopts a risk-based approach in determining the types of samples to be collected, the frequency and number of samples for testing. In addition to food with specific standards stipulated by law, the CFS also keeps a close watch on food which was involved in food poisoning outbreaks and other food safety incidents in the past, as well as food produced or sold by food premises that have been previously convicted. Moreover, we will also take samples of food that has been the subject of public complaint or concern. In general, the safety of food available in Hong Kong is maintained at a high standard. Under the existing food surveillance programme, about 61 000 samples are taken for chemical, microbiological and radioactive tests every year and the dissatisfactory rates are very low (0.3% in 2005). In 2006, about 63 000 samples will be taken for testing. The sampling size will be reviewed and adjusted annually having regard to availability of resources and risk analysis results. The CFS will also check 55 000 labels in 2006, compared with 48 000 labels being checked in 2005.

4. There has been an increasing number of food complaints in recent years (from some 2 700 cases in 2002 to 5 500 cases in 2005). The CFS will closely monitor and review the situation with a view to improving the handling of food complaints in a more efficient and effective manner. Additional staff will be deployed to deal with an anticipated 6 000 cases in 2006.

5. On the prevention and management of food poisoning outbreaks, the CFS works closely with Department of Health on investigating and implementing control measures on food poisoning incidents. We focus on epidemiological investigation, formulate expert opinion on the source and contributing factor(s) on the outbreak, and offer professional advice on the control measures. We will also conduct more health education activities in food premises to prevent further occurrence of food poisoning. To increase awareness of the trade and public on food safety and to protect public health, the CFS will conduct a total of some 30 workshops and seminars, including tailor-made workshops for elderly homes on Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems.

6. The CFS reviews and updates food legislation from time to time. In respect of food labelling legislation, subsequent to a 36-month grace period, the new requirement of labelling of allergens will be effective in July 2007. We are also reviewing the framework of the labelling scheme for nutrition information of pre-packaged food and considering an overhaul of the Preservatives in Food Regulations to allow the trade more choice of preservatives to be used in food.

7. To enhance food safety control at source, the CFS will step up liaison with the Mainland to ensure safe import whilst conduct joint operations with Customs and Excise Department against smuggling and other illegal activities. More work will be embarked with a view to improving the existing framework to control the import of live fish and fishery products. Separately, the CFS will explore with the Mainland authorities the feasibility of using the new applications of information technology to ensure effective tracing of food along the production chain in line with better food safety management trend through control at source. The CFS will also increase the number of audit visits to food animal farms and food processing plants in the Mainland. In 2006, the CFS will conduct 35 regular audit visits of farms exporting food animals to Hong Kong. During these visits, regulatory mechanisms would be subject to audit and review to ensure stipulated requirements and set standards were met in the Mainland.

8. Liaison with the food authorities of exporting countries / regions plays an important role on ensuring safety of imported food. In addition to the

existing communication channel with the inspection and quarantine authorities, the CFS will enhance communication with the State Food and Drug Administration, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Commerce, the Guangdong Provincial Government and the Shenzhen Municipal Government in the Mainland to deal with any food safety matters that may have cross-boundary implications.

9. Additional staff including medical and health officers, veterinarians, health inspectors and science laboratory technicians, will be recruited by end 2006 to early 2007 and they would all be deployed under the “Food Safety and Public Health” programme area i.e. to ensure that food available for human consumption is wholesome, hygienic and safe and to safeguard public health through testing and control of live food animals and other high risk food items as well as to enhance risk management. Additional resources have also been deployed for the Government Laboratory to conduct the necessary tests.

Risk Assessment

10. Risk assessment forms the scientific basis of risk management and communication in the risk-based food safety control model adopted by the CFS. For better protection of public health, the CFS will increase the number of risk assessment studies performed. For example, the CFS will conduct study on more persistent organic pollutants in compliance with the Stockholm Convention. Additional surveys will be conducted on the safety of seasonal food. Further increase is anticipated when the results of a population-based food consumption survey, a study commissioned by CFS to the Chinese University of Hong Kong, are made available. Upon its completion in end 2007, the survey will provide a comprehensive database for risk assessment studies and the risk assessment capacity of the CFS will be much enhanced.

11. To assist in the development and review of food standards and risk communication strategies, the CFS will set up an Expert Committee on Food Safety within the next couple of months to provide advice and insightful opinions to the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene. The CFS will also enhance liaison with international food authorities, for example, the Codex Alimentarius Commission, to keep abreast of the latest development of international food standards and regulations.

12. Additional staff including food scientists, statistician, food chemists and science laboratory technicians will be recruited in 2006/07 to cope with the additional work in risk assessment.

Risk Communication

13. The CFS will adopt a proactive and transparent approach in communicating issues related to food safety to the trade and public. Information will be disseminated in a more timely and frequent manner through various channels. In addition to the quarterly publication “Food Safety Bulletin”, starting in August, the CFS will publish a monthly food safety bulletin entitled “Food Safety Focus”, which is an online publication updating the trade and public on recent food incidents and food safety information. A website for the CFS has been created in May 2006 to facilitate retrieval of information by the trade and consumers. The design of the website will be updated to make it more user-friendly. Information on food alerts and food safety tips will be uploaded onto the website in a timely manner.

14. The CFS will broadcast a series of Announcements of Public Interest (API) on television and radio related to food safety. The APIs on “Prevention of food poisoning” and “Reducing pesticides in vegetables” are to be aired in July/August. The CFS will host a Food Safety Day on 26 August to enhance the awareness of the public and the trade on the prevention of cross contamination of raw and ready-to-eat food. This will be complemented by radio broadcasting and roving exhibitions to the various districts in Hong Kong. Providing a forum for local and overseas food safety experts to share experience in food safety management and control, the CFS will host an International Symposium on Food Safety in January 2007, which is the first of its kind to be organized in Hong Kong.

15. To enhance communication with the trade and consumers, the CFS will conduct a regular Trade Consultation Forum starting in July. The Forum will provide an interactive platform for the Administration to brief the trade on the latest development on measures related to food safety and seek their views and comment. The trade can also make use of the Forum to express their views on issues of their concern. The CFS will also establish a Consumer Liaison Group in August to strengthen the ties with the general public. Through the Liaison Group, public views on matters relating to food safety could be solicited. Recruitment of members to the liaison group has already commenced. The CFS will also conduct surveys to collect public views on food safety. Feedback from trade consultation forums, consumer liaison groups and public survey findings will be useful for the CFS to formulate better risk communication strategies as well as fostering tripartite work partnerships in enhancing food safety.

16. Additional staff including health inspector, medical and health officer and food scientist will be recruited in 2006 to handle the enhanced work in risk

communication.

Additional Staffing for the CFS

17. Given the implementation of efficiency savings measures, the overall establishment of FEHD has decreased substantially between 2003/04 and 2005/06 (see Annex). The additional some 70 staff to be recruited in 2006/07 would be deployed to work in the CFS for carrying out risk management, risk assessment and risk communication work under the “Food Safety and Public Health” programme area. The existing establishment for the programme areas of “Environmental Hygiene and Related Services”, “Market Management and Hawker Control” and “Public Education and Community Involvement” would not increase.

Way Forward

18. The CFS will review its work priorities regularly to ensure that Hong Kong people will enjoy safer and healthier food. The CFS will also make use of the best available science and evidence to guide their decision making process and make reference to international best practice in their work.

Advice Sought

19. Members are invited to advise on the work of the CFS.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Centre for Food Safety
July 2006

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

ANNEX

Analysis of Establishment by Programme

<u>Description</u>	<u>Staff Establishment</u>		
	as at 31.3.2003	as at 31.3.2006	as at 31.3.2007 (Projected)
Programme (1): Food Safety and Public Health [Aim: To ensure that food available for human consumption is wholesome, hygienic and safe, and to safeguard public health through testing and control of live food animals and effective pest control.]	1 294	1 362	1 435
Programme (2): Environmental Hygiene and Related Services [Aim: To provide quality environmental hygiene services and facilities; and to safeguard public health through licensing and regulation of licensed food premises.]	6 702	5 814	5 786
Programme (3): Market Management and Hawker Control [Aim: To maintain a clean and hygienic environment in public markets and to control on-street hawking activities.]	4 451	3 805	3 805
Programme (4): Public Education and Community Involvement [Aim: To promote food safety and the maintenance of a hygienic environment through partnership with the community and a multi-media publicity campaign.]	42	27	27
Total	12 489	11 008	11 053