

**For discussion
20 April 2006**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Pesticide Residues in Fresh Vegetables

Purpose

This paper briefs members on the regulatory mechanism for pesticide residues in fresh vegetables.

Background

2. At present, over 90% of fresh vegetables supplied to Hong Kong comes from the Mainland whilst local produce only accounts for 4% . The Administration takes samples for tests at import control points as well as wholesale and retail markets.

3. For imported vegetables, the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (ASQIQ) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) have agreed to a set of *Administrative Measures on the Inspection and Quarantine for Vegetable Supply to Hong Kong and Macao* (the Administrative Measures) which stipulates that all Mainland vegetables supplied to Hong Kong must come from registered farms. At present, there are over 100 registered Mainland farms supplying vegetables to Hong Kong. Under the Administrative Measures, the Mainland authorities regularly inspect the registered farms that supply vegetables to Hong Kong to check the use of pesticides and take samples to test for pesticide residues. Therefore, most of the vegetables in Hong Kong market are already strictly regulated with regard to their places of production/origin, use of pesticide, etc.

4. Moreover, both parties have agreed that all Mainland vegetables must be imported through Man Kam To into Hong Kong to facilitate the FEHD to take samples to test for pesticide residues and other harmful substances. Of the 20 000 samples of imported vegetables taken by FEHD for testing in 2005, only 10 (or 0.05%) samples failed to comply with our requirements. Apart from using quick tests (which requires about 30 minutes) to screen for pesticide residues, the FEHD also takes samples to test for other prohibited pesticides, including DDT and Lindane (which requires three to four days).

5. For local production, about half of the locally produced vegetables are supplied to the local markets through Vegetable Marketing Organisation (VMO) and all vegetables marketed by VMO are sampled for testing of pesticide residues. In fact, most farmers that produce in commercial volume on a regular basis have already joined the Accredited Farm Scheme of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and market their produce through VMO. Under the Scheme, these farms are required to adopt good horticultural practice and integrated pest management measures. Their vegetable production is also monitored by VMO for pesticide residues before distribution to retail outlets.

6. The methods, scope and timing of tests adopted by VMO are similar to those of the FEHD and include both quick test and screening for prohibited pesticides. Over the past six months, VMO has tested 8 900 samples of local vegetables and has not found any unregistered pesticide. Only six samples were found to have pesticide residues exceeding permitted levels.

7. Like other countries around the world, the inspection and quarantine authorities of Hong Kong take samples to test for pesticide residues for highly perishable farm produce, including vegetables. These samples are taken at various levels. At the point of import, FEHD strives to take samples from vegetables placed at various points of transport vehicles. At the wholesale and retail markets, the authorities also take samples from a variety of vegetables, including leafy vegetables, pulses and rhizomes, for tests. For the farms, there is legislation that regulates the possession or use of prohibited pesticides (see the paragraph below). But for permitted pesticides, the only feasible and effective monitoring method is to take samples of farm produce at the wholesale and retail level to test for pesticide residues since the amount of residues vary with time and the permitted residue levels also vary for different vegetables.

Regulating the use of pesticides

8. The use of pesticide in Hong Kong is regulated by *Pesticide Ordinance* (Cap. 133) and its subsidiary legislation. Under the law, no person shall import, manufacture, sell or supply any pesticide unless he has a licence issued by the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

9. Of the six pesticides allegedly identified by a NGO in its screening tests recently, four of them, namely DDT, Lindane, hexachlorocyclohexane and methamidophos, have not been registered in Hong Kong and, therefore, are unavailable in the local market. AFCD staff also routinely inspect pesticide retail outlets to ensure compliance with the Ordinance. Anyone who breaches the provision is liable to one-year imprisonment and \$50,000 fine.

On reports of illegal pesticides and excessive pesticide residues in vegetables

10. In view of the recently released findings from a NGO on illegal pesticides and excessive pesticide residues in vegetables on sale in local supermarkets, we have contacted the organization concerned to seek further information on their testing standards and methods. We have also met with the management of the supermarkets concerned to urge them to improve the system for tracking and tracing the source of their vegetables and other farm produce to safeguard the safety of consumers. To address public concern, the Administration will explore the feasibility of instituting a voluntary registration system for farmers engaged in commercial production of food produce and will consult the public in due course.

11. The Administration's response to the questions raised by the Chairman of this panel is attached in **Annex**.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
April 2006

Monitoring Chemical Residues in Vegetables

Since the LegCo Panel for Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene will hold a special meeting on 20 April 2006 to discuss the issue of pesticide residues exceeding permitted levels and prohibited pesticides in vegetables on sale in Hong Kong, I hope the Bureau may address the following questions during the meeting:

Tests Conducted at Man Kam To

1. The Food and Environmental Department (FEHD) has stationed staff there to conduct tests on Mainland vegetables supplied to Hong Kong. How do they take samples for test? Do they just take samples of vegetables placed near the door of the vehicles slotted for tests? If so, how can such unscientific method be improved?

The FEHD takes samples of vegetables supplied to Hong Kong for tests at different levels. At the point of import, FEHD strives to take samples placed at different spots of transport vehicles. The department also takes samples at wholesale and retail markets for tests.

2. Do the FEHD staff stationed at Man Kam To work round the clock to conduct sampling tests? If not, how can the Administration ensure that the vegetables imported to Hong Kong during their off-duty hours are also tested appropriately?

Staff of FEHD are always on duty during the operating hours of Man Kam To Control Point.

3. For the tests on vegetable samples in Government laboratory, are they conducted solely to screen for residues of legally permitted pesticides and do not include prohibited pesticides such as Lindane and DDT? If so, please state the reasons. Please provide the details of sample size taken for such tests from Man Kam To and retail outlets over the past year.

In 2005, the FEHD has taken 20 000 samples of imported vegetables at the point of import as well as wholesale and retail levels and found only 10 (0.05%) samples that failed to comply with our requirements. Apart from using quick tests to screen for pesticide residues, the FEHD also takes samples to test for

other prohibited pesticides, such as DDT and Lindane. The methods, scope and timing of tests adopted by Vegetable Marketing Organization (VMO) are similar to those of the FEHD and include both quick test and screening for prohibited pesticides. Over the past six months, VMO has tested 8 900 samples of local vegetables and has not found any unregistered pesticide. It has only found six samples that contained pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels.

4. On monitoring edible farm produce, does the Government confine its work to monitoring the amount of pesticide residues in vegetables? How many samples of other farm produce, such as gourd vegetables, pulses and fruits, have the Government taken at Man Kam To and retail outlets over the past year? If their sample sizes are far smaller than that of vegetables, please state the reasons. Will the Government step up the sampling work in this respect?

At the wholesale and retail markets, the authorities also take samples from a variety of vegetables, including leafy vegetables, pulses and rhizomes, for tests.

The Role of Vegetable Marketing Organization

5. We understand that the VMO is a non-profit organization operating on the basis of self-financing and is not a Government department. Through its wholesale market at Cheung Sha Wan, VMO conducts tests for pesticide residues on behalf of vegetable wholesalers and buyers. Does the VMO have the authority to initiate prosecution and prohibit sale of vegetables that are found to contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels or prohibited pesticides? If not, how can the Government ensure that the vegetables sold through VMO comply with food safety standards?

Upon discovery of any vegetables that contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels or prohibited pesticides, the VMO would inform FEHD which would then follow up the case and, when necessary, initiate prosecution and prohibit sale of the vegetables concerned.

6. Upon discovery of vegetables that contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels or prohibited pesticides, will the VMO inform the public of its findings? If not, please state the reasons. How does the VMO assure the public to have confidence in the vegetables sold though it?

Upon discovery of any vegetables that contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels or prohibited pesticides, the VMO would contact the FEHD to follow up the case. The FEHD would follow the regular food monitoring procedures in handling the findings.

Monitoring local farms

7. At present, locally produced vegetables and fruits may be sold to the market directly. Since these vegetables and fruits have not been subject to tests by Government, how can the Government ensure that they do not contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels or prohibited pesticides?

The FEHD will continue to take samples of vegetables for tests at the point of import as well as wholesale and retail markets to ensure food safety.

8. Since there is no registration system for local farms engaged in horticultural production, will the Government consider implementing such a system to ensure that locally produced farm products meet the food safety standards?

To address the public concern, the Administration will explore the feasibility of instituting a voluntary registration system for farmers engaged in commercial horticultural production of food produce and consult the public in due course.

Tracing the source

9. Will the Government set the policy for setting up a system to track and trace the source of farm products, such as vegetables, gourd vegetables and fruits, to ensure that edible farm products that are found to contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels or prohibited pesticides may be effectively traced back to their sources to ensure food safety in Hong Kong?

At present, all Mainland vegetables supplied to Hong Kong must come from registered farms. Therefore, most of the vegetables sold in Hong Kong markets are already subject to strict regulation with regard to their places of production/origin and use of pesticides. For locally produced vegetables, about half of them are supplied to the local markets through VMO and all vegetables marketed by VMO are sampled for testing of pesticide residues. As for the

remaining small supply, the Government will explore the feasibility of instituting a voluntary registration system for farmers engaged in commercial horticultural production of food produce and consult the public in due course.

10. Regarding the findings of vegetables containing pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels and prohibited pesticides found in two local supermarkets, has the Government contacted the two companies concerned to obtain information on the origins of the vegetables and their suppliers? If yes, please provide the details. If no, please state the reasons. Are the supermarkets entitled to refuse to disclose the information to the Government?

The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau has already met with the senior management of the two supermarkets separately. The managers have agreed to the proposal of the Government to introduce a track and trace system to identify the origins of vegetables and other farm produce.

Liaison with the Mainland

11. In view of the findings of a green group that disclosed that vegetables sold in local supermarkets contain pesticide residues exceeding the permitted levels and prohibited pesticides and given that the Mainland is our largest vegetable supplier, has the Government contacted the Mainland authorities to exchange views on the issue and urged the Mainland authorities to step up inspection of the registered farms that supply vegetables to Hong Kong?

The FEHD has maintained regular communication and exchanges on the work related to Administrative Measures on the Inspection and Quarantine for Vegetable Supply to Hong Kong and Macao with State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine. We will continue to liaise with the Mainland authorities on inspection of the registered farms that supply vegetables to Hong Kong, including the use of pesticides and taking samples to test for pesticide residues. FEHD has also notified relevant Mainland authorities of this issue.

12. Has the FEHD ever dispatched staff to inspect the Mainland registered farms that supplied vegetables to Hong Kong? If so, has the Government discovered any instances of pesticide abuse? If yes, does the Government have any authority to stop these farms from exporting vegetables to Hong Kong? If no, will the

Government dispatch staff to inspect these Mainland registered farms in the future?

The FEHD has dispatched staff to inspect the Mainland registered farms that supply vegetables to Hong Kong. When necessary, we will consider with the Mainland authorities concerned to strengthen the inspection work.

Hon. LI Wah-ming, Fred

19 April 2006