

## INFORMATION NOTE

### The Regulatory Framework of Food Safety in Singapore

#### 1. Background

1.1 The Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene and the Panel on Environmental Affairs, at a meeting on 29 November 2005, requested the Research and Library Services Division to provide information on the regulation of food safety in places outside Hong Kong. The purpose of this information note is to provide Members with information on the regulatory framework of food safety adopted in Singapore.

1.2 Similar to Hong Kong, Singapore only produces a small proportion of its total fresh food consumption and is reliant primarily on food imports. Table 1 below provides the figures of consumption, import and local farm production of selected food products in 2004. Singapore does not have any beef, pork or fruit production, and only produces small volumes of chickens, fish, eggs and vegetables for local consumption.

**Table 1 — Figures of consumption, import and local farm production of selected food products in Singapore in 2004**

	Beef (tonnes)	Pork (tonnes)	Chickens (tonnes)	Fish (tonnes)	Eggs (million pieces)	Vegetables (tonnes)	Fruits (tonnes)
Consumption	18 073	86 501	132 311	96 015	1 115.9	356 326	336 923
Import	18 470	87 487	133 906	89 734	737.6	360 593	378 442
Local farm production	Nil	Nil	1 635	7 579	378.5	17 192	Nil

Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority. (2005) *Annual Report 2004-05*, p. 87.

#### 2. Food safety legislation

2.1 The following acts provide the regulatory framework of food safety in Singapore:

- (a) Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority Act, which establishes the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA), a statutory agency that regulates food safety;

- (b) Animals and Birds Act, which prevents the introduction into, and the spreading within, Singapore of diseases of animals, birds or fish;
- (c) Control of Plants Act, which governs the cultivation, import, transshipment and export of plants and plant products;
- (d) Feeding Stuffs Act, which provides for the control of feeding stuffs for animals and birds;
- (e) Fisheries Act, which controls the use of fishing ports and harbours, and the marketing and distribution of fish that is landed directly from fishing vessels;
- (f) Wholesome Meat and Fish Act, which regulates the processing, packing, inspection, import, distribution, sale, transshipment and export of meat products and fish products; and
- (g) Sale of Food Act, which prescribes standards for the wholesomeness and purity of food products.

### **3. Competent authority**

3.1 In April 2000, the Primary Production Department of the Ministry of National Development was restructured into a statutory board, AVA, to give it a higher degree of autonomy and flexibility to respond to the needs of Singaporeans and the challenges faced by the food and agriculture industry. According to the Singaporean government, such a restructuring aimed at upgrading the standards of food safety and maintaining animal and plant health.

3.2 After the restructuring, food safety in Singapore was under the purview of AVA and the Food Control Department (FCD) of the Ministry of Environment. The demarcation of food safety responsibilities was generally by food types. AVA regulated the safety of primary food, including meat and fish and their products, milk, eggs, fresh vegetables and fruits, while FCD regulated the safety of processed foods. This demarcation applied to both imported as well as locally-produced food.

3.3 The Singaporean government noted that the mode of demarcation of food safety between AVA and FCD was not clear or intuitive. The general public and the people in the food industry might confuse as to the responsibilities of each agency. In addition, AVA and FCD adopted different approaches to food safety control for imported food. AVA emphasized food safety standards at the sources of food supply, while FCD relied mainly on monitoring of food products at the retail end.

3.4 In July 2002, the Singaporean government transferred FCD to AVA so that it would become a one-stop agency for all food products, including imported and locally-produced fresh produce and processed foods. The rationale behind was to further strengthen the food safety system to minimize public health risks.

3.5 After the rationalization, AVA, placed under the Ministry of National Development, becomes a one-stop agency for all food safety matters, and is entrusted with the overall responsibility of setting and enforcing food safety standards for imported and locally-produced fresh produce and processed foods. Its mission is to ensure a resilient supply of safe food, safeguard the health of animals and plants, and facilitate agri-trade for Singapore.

#### Organizational structure

3.6 AVA has a board of directors responsible for making policy decisions on food safety. The 10 board members, appointed by the Singaporean government, come from the business, academic and government sectors. In addition, the chief executive officer implements policies laid down by the board.

3.7 The four departments of AVA are:

- (a) Food and Veterinary Administration;
- (b) Food Supply and Technology Department;
- (c) Policy and Corporate Communications Department; and
- (d) Corporate Services Department.

3.8 Among these four departments, the Food and Veterinary Administration and the Food Supply and Technology Department are responsible for the enforcement of regulatory measures for locally-produced and imported food products. (Please see Appendix I for the organizational structure of AVA.)

3.9 As at 31 March 2005, AVA had 794 employees. The number of management/professional and technical support staff was 514, which accounted for about 65% of the total. Please see Table 2 for the categories of staff in each department.

**Table 2 — Staff strength of the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority**

<b>Categories of staff</b>	<b>Food and veterinary administration</b>	<b>Food supply and technology</b>	<b>Corporate development and support</b>	<b>Total</b>
Management/professional	156	46	50	252
Technical support	143	113	6	262
Non-technical support	44	18	44	106
Operations support	71	98	5	174
<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>794</b>

Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority. (2005) *Annual Report 2004-05*, p. 76.

### *Staff development*

3.10 On staff development, AVA offers various training courses to its staff. Each year, supervisors work with their subordinates to identify the short-term and long-term training needs. In the fiscal year of 2004-05, AVA provided an average of 13.9 training days per staff.

## **4. Food safety regulatory system**

4.1 Import control is an important dimension of the food safety regulatory system in Singapore, as more than 90% of the country's food is imported. Sources supplying food products to Singapore must meet the import requirements for food safety. The food safety regulatory system generally consists of the following six elements:

- (a) trade licence system;
- (b) inspection of food products and establishments;
- (c) accreditation of foreign farms and establishments;
- (d) laboratory testing;
- (e) enforcement activities; and
- (f) food recalling system.

### Trade licence system

4.2 People engaging in trading<sup>1</sup> meat, fish, vegetables, fruits and processed food in Singapore are required to be licensed by AVA. Traders must ensure that all food products imported comply with food safety requirements. They may initiate or arrange for quality control checks and/or due diligence checks for products to be imported by sending them to accredited laboratories for analysis before importation.

4.3 General requirements for a person to obtain a trade licence include:

- (a) registering under the Business Registration Act or being incorporated under the Companies Act;
- (b) submitting an application form stating the details of the applicant as well as the company;
- (c) paying an annual import licence fee of S\$84 (HK\$388)<sup>2</sup> for meat and fish and S\$378 (HK\$1,746) for vegetables and fruits; and
- (d) opening a General Inter-bank Recurring Order account<sup>3</sup> for the payment of fees.

4.4 AVA can issue a trade licence within one working day. As at 31 March 2005, there were 2 359 traders for meat and fish, 894 traders for vegetables and fruits and 5 105 traders for processed food registered with AVA.

### *Import procedures*

4.5 Livestock, poultry, fish and meat products may only be imported from selected countries such as Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States, and accredited farms in over 15 countries, including China, Malaysia, and South Africa. This arrangement is intended to ensure only quality food products would be exported to Singapore. (Please see Appendix II for the list of places approved to export meat to Singapore.)

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<sup>1</sup> Trading may refer to importing, exporting or transshipment.

<sup>2</sup> The average exchange rate in 2004 was S\$1 = HK\$4.6.

<sup>3</sup> A General Inter-bank Recurring Order account allows a customer of a bank to authorize the bank to deduct money from the account regularly and remit the money directly into other bank accounts designated by him or her.

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4.6 An import permit issued by AVA is required for importing primary food products and processed food. Traders may apply for the import permit by declaring the import through the TradeNet system<sup>4</sup>. The system will route the application to AVA for processing. Upon approval, the import permit for the consignment is incorporated in the cargo clearance permit printed at the trader's terminal.

4.7 Animal products imported should be accompanied by a veterinary health certificate certifying that Singapore's health requirements have been complied with. The health certificate should include information such as the type, quantity and marking of the product exported, the name and the establishment number of the slaughterhouse and/or processing plant, date of slaughter/manufacture, and the name and address of the consignor and consignee. All imported vegetables and fruits are also required to be tagged to indicate their sources. Processed food imported should be accompanied by a laboratory test report, which certifies that the consignment of the product is safe for human consumption. Other supporting documents such as bills of lading, airway bills and invoices should also be submitted.

### Inspection of food products and establishments

#### *Imported livestock*

4.8 An antemortem and postmortem inspection is required for livestock intended to be imported to Singapore. Upon admission to the abattoir, every animal is thoroughly checked by AVA to ensure that only well rested and clinically healthy animals are allowed for slaughter. The inspection is undertaken within two working days upon arrival of imported livestock.

4.9 Upon slaughter, AVA officers inspect every carcass and its offal once again. All diseased carcasses and offal are condemned as unfit for human consumption. Only those meat and offal, which have passed the inspection, will be released for sale.

#### *Imported meat and meat products*

4.10 Besides documentary checks, AVA also examines every consignment of meat imports visually for wholesomeness and/or presence of disease, spoilage or economic fraud. At the same time, samples of import consignments are taken for laboratory analysis. Imported meat and meat products are held in approved cold stores until they are cleared by physical examination and laboratory testing. Unfit consignments are either destroyed or returned to the country of origin. Normally speaking, about 99% of meat consignments are cleared within two working days. Please see Table 3 for the figures of consignments inspected and rejected in the fiscal year of 2004-05.

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<sup>4</sup> The TradeNet system is a nationwide electronic trade documentation system that approves permit applications.

**Table 3 — Figures of consignments inspected and rejected in the fiscal year of 2004-05**

	<b>Meat</b>	<b>Fish</b>	<b>Vegetables and fruits</b>	<b>Processed food</b>
Number of consignments inspected	55 313	2 096	11 975	7 395
Number of consignments rejected	289	12	147	35

Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority. (2005) *Annual Report 2004-05*, p. 88

#### *Imported fish and fishery products*

4.11 AVA monitors imported fish for various chemical preservatives such as formaldehyde, benzoic acid, boric acid, heavy metals, antibiotic residues and parasites.

4.12 Control efforts are directed at selected high-risk<sup>5</sup> fishery products such as oysters, clams, mussels, scallops and cooked crab meat. High-risk shellfish products may only be imported from sources with acceptable shellfish sanitation programmes, and each import consignment must be accompanied by a health certificate from the country of origin. These products are automatically detained upon arrival for physical inspection and laboratory testing.

#### *Imported vegetables/ fruits and locally-produced vegetables*

4.13 AVA implements a basket-tagging system, which requires that all imported vegetables/fruits and locally-produced vegetables must be tagged to indicate the sources. In addition, AVA conducts routine testing to ensure food products do not contain excessive pesticides. Consignments which fail the test can be traced back through the basket-tagging system, and will be rejected or destroyed under AVA's supervision.

<sup>5</sup> High risk food products such as livestock, meat and certain seafood products are subject to close control. They are automatically detained upon arrival for physical inspection and further laboratory testing. Every import consignment must come with a health certificate from the country of origin. On the other hand, low risk food products can be put into market for sale directly after production or importation. AVA may inspect them randomly.

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*Imported processed food*<sup>6</sup>

4.14 Some 3 500 types of processed food represented by more than 17 600 brands are imported into Singapore each year. These products range from bakery products, cereal products, dairy products, sauces, beverages, fats and oils, spices and condiments to infant foods. AVA categorizes processed food into high-risk and lower-risk products. High-risk processed food is required to undergo stringent safety assessments prior to entry into the market while lower-risk processed food is placed under post-market surveillance.

4.15 Since the fiscal year of 2004-05, AVA has required importers to submit reports of safety assessments and quality control on imported products such as minimally-processed fruits and vegetables, processed eggs, breads, chocolates and infant cereals, in addition to the documents proving that these products are obtained from regulated sources.

4.16 About 14 000 inspections were carried out on 230 369 processed food consignments imported into Singapore in the fiscal year of 2004-05. Of these, 35 consignments were rejected. During the same time period, more than 12 200 samples were collected for laboratory analysis.

*Local slaughterhouses*<sup>7</sup>

4.17 The Buroh Lane Abattoir<sup>8</sup>, 14 chicken slaughterhouses and four duck slaughterhouses are subject to regular stringent checks and control to ensure that the livestock slaughtered and processed are safe and wholesome. AVA carries out inspection programmes based on the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points<sup>9</sup> (HACCP).

*Local farms*

4.18 Pesticides are required to be registered and approved by AVA before they may be used on farms. To date, 285 pesticide products have been approved for agricultural use. AVA also certifies pesticide operators who supervise the use of pesticides on farms.

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<sup>6</sup> Information on the inspection of locally-produced processed food is not available in the public domain.

<sup>7</sup> Singapore stopped slaughtering live poultry in wet markets in 1992.

<sup>8</sup> It is the only abattoir in Singapore.

<sup>9</sup> The HACCP method is focused on identifying hazards which might result in consumers receiving harmful food products. HACCP was first utilized by the Pillsbury Company in 1959 to produce foods for the United States space programme. Since then, HACCP has gained wide acceptance as the state-of-the-art control method for preventing biological, chemical and physical hazards from entering the human food distribution chain.

*Local meat, fish and food processing establishments*

4.19 AVA is responsible for approving and licensing all local meat, fish and food processing establishments and cold stores. AVA carries out inspections and audit checks of these processing establishments to ensure their compliance with sanitary and hygiene requirements. AVA grades each of these establishments based on their standards of hygiene and good manufacturing practices.

4.20 As part of AVA's effort to promote self-regulation, every local processed food factory has to appoint a food hygiene officer to ensure that the Good Food Hygiene Practices and the Good Manufacturing Practices are being adhered to at all times. Food hygiene officers are required to attend advanced food safety courses.

Accreditation of foreign farms and establishments

4.21 Accreditation of foreign farms and food processing plants is a measure used by AVA to ensure that primary products such as livestock, poultry, fish, vegetables and fruits imported into Singapore are supplied only from reputable and reliable sources that meet the requirements of safe and wholesome food for human consumption.

4.22 Foreign farms which seek accreditation to export primary products to Singapore can submit an application to AVA. A licence of accreditation to export is issued to those foreign farms which have passed the tests of documentary review and site inspections performed by AVA. In the fiscal year of 2004-05, AVA paid a total of 385 inspection visits to foreign farms, processing establishments, slaughterhouses and laboratories. The countries visited included China, Brunei, Brazil, Italy, Malaysia and Thailand.

4.23 Export establishments that have passed the tests of documentary review and site inspections are included in the list of AVA-approved establishments. The list contains the names of establishments that are allowed to export primary produce to Singapore. Nevertheless, AVA may suspend any AVA-approved establishment from exporting products to Singapore if subsequent inspection examinations reveal that the products are unfit for human consumption.<sup>10</sup> Such an establishment may be removed from the list of AVA-approved establishments if its products fail continuously in meeting AVA's health standards.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> AVA suspended a total of 55 poultry farms and 22 meat and seafood establishments in the fiscal year of 2004-05.

<sup>11</sup> Seven meat establishments were removed from the AVA-approved list in the fiscal year of 2004-05.

### Laboratory testing

4.24 Laboratory testing is an important aspect of Singapore's food safety system. The Veterinary Public Health Laboratory (VPHL), established under AVA's veterinary public health laboratory division, is the official laboratory for food testing to monitor food quality. It undertakes laboratory analysis of food products such as tests for diseases, food poisoning and spoilage organisms, harmful chemicals and toxins, and pesticide residues. (Please see Appendix III for a list of possible tests carried out by VPHL to find out any food safety hazards present in food products.)

4.25 In addition to supporting AVA's food safety programme, VPHL provides analytical services to the local food industry as well as government departments and statutory boards. In the fiscal year of 2004-05, a total of 1 006 605 tests were conducted on 57 478 samples of locally-produced and imported food products (see Table 4). In recent years, measures have been taken to speed up the food sample testing process, which include the use of validated rapid tests, pooling of samples as appropriate and upgrading of machinery and testing equipment.

**Table 4 — Performance indicators of the Veterinary Public Health Laboratory in the fiscal year of 2004-05**

<b>Performance indicators</b>	<b>Health certification</b>	<b>Import control</b>	<b>Service and surveillance</b>	<b>Quality tests</b>	<b>Research and development and quality assurance</b>	<b>Total</b>
Number of samples tested	3 685	26 959	9 895	1 493	15 446	57 478
Number of laboratory tests performed	33 895	798 640	101 216	36 140	36 714	1 006 605

Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority. (2005) *Annual Report 2004-05*, p. 32.

### Enforcement activities

4.26 In the fiscal year of 2004-05, there were 464 cases involving illegal imports of meat, fish and related products. In addition, a total of 123 cases were found to be either violating the licensing condition of processing meat and fish products without a licence, or not complying with licensing conditions for slaughterhouses/meat and fish processing establishments. The offenders engaging in such activities are required to settle the fines within the prescribed period.

4.27 Warning letters were also issued to three local farms during the same period for failure to ensure structural and procedural maintenance of effective bird-proofing of the poultry houses as directed by AVA. The farmers were also asked to carry out immediate rectifications.

#### Food recalling system

4.28 Under section 9 of the Wholesome Meat and Fish (Processing Establishments and Cold Stores) Rules, AVA is empowered to order importers/suppliers to recall food products which are unfit for human consumption. Section 9 provides that:

*"Where AVA has reason to believe that any meat product or fish product which has been processed in a licensed processing establishment is adulterated, contaminated or otherwise unfit for human consumption, AVA may issue a written directive to the licensee of the processing establishment requiring the licensee to forthwith recall all stocks and to cease the sale, supply or distribution, of the meat product or fish product."*

4.29 According to AVA, there were two food recalling cases in the past two years. The details are provided below:

#### *Frozen half-shelf oyster case*

4.30 Following an outbreak of gastroenteritis in January 2004, AVA ordered the importers to recall frozen half-shelf oysters imported from China. Since then, AVA has revised import conditions to require such imports to be supplied from approved sources with acceptable sanitation programmes, pre-export testing, and "hold and test" procedures at the point of import.

#### *Eel case*

4.31 In August 2005, AVA detected a low level of malachite green residues in samples of eels from China. The following measures were immediately adopted:

- (a) ordering importers to conduct a recall from the market place as a precaution;
- (b) subjecting all eel imports from China to a "hold and test" inspection regime, i.e. products can only be released after satisfactorily passing a test for malachite green residues;

- (c) requiring imports of eels and processed eel products from China to have pre-export testing for freedom from malachite green, and demanding import consignments to be further tested on arrival in Singapore for verification; and
- (d) extending the intensified surveillance programme for malachite green residues to cover eels from sources other than China as well as other fish cultivated by fish farms, such as catfish, salmon and trout.

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16 January 2006  
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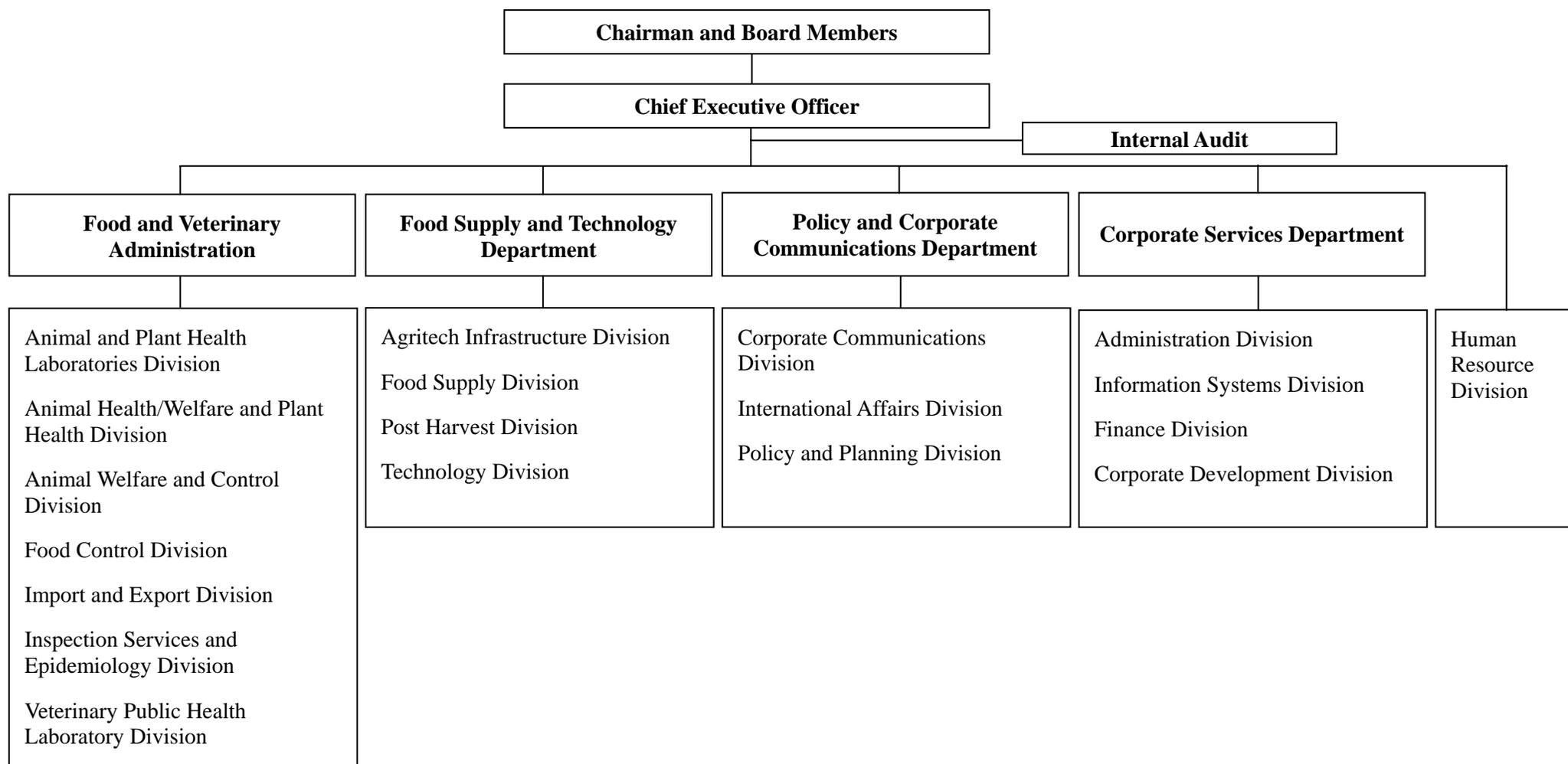
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**Appendix I**

**Organizational structure of the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority**



Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (2005a).

## Appendix II

## List of places approved to export meat to Singapore

A.II.1 Table 5 below presents the list of places approved to export meat to Singapore.

Table 5 — List of places approved to export meat to Singapore

Places	Beef	Pork	Poultry	Mutton
Argentina*	+	0	+	+
Australia	+	+	+(4)	+
Belgium*	+	+	+	+
Brazil*	+	+	+	+
Canada	+	+	+	+
China*	+	+	+	0
Denmark	+	+	+	+
Finland*	+	+	0	0
France*	+	+	+	0
Germany*	+	+	+	0
Hungary	0	+	+	0
Ireland	+	+	+	+
Israel*	0	0	+	0
Italy*	0	+	0	0
Japan	+	0	0	0
Malaysia*	0	0	+	0
Netherlands	+	+	+	+
New Zealand	+	+	0	+
South Africa*	+	+	+	0
Sweden*	+	+	0	0
Switzerland	+	+	+	+
Taiwan*	0	+	0	0
Thailand*	0	0	+	0
United Kingdom	+	+	+	+
United States	+	+	+	+
Uruguay*	+	0	0	+

Notes: (1) "+" means approved.

(2) "0" means not approved.

(3) "\*" refers to meat must be derived from AVA approved establishments.

(4) poultry must be derived from AVA approved establishments.

Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (2005a).

### Appendix III

#### List of possible tests carried out by the Veterinary Public Health Laboratory

A.III.1 Table 6 below presents the list of possible tests carried out by VPHL to find out any food safety hazards present in food products.

**Table 6 — List of possible tests carried out by the Veterinary Public Health Laboratory**

Primary produce/ products	Food safety hazards
Meat and meat products	Heavy metals, preservatives and additives, polychlorinated biphenyls, radioactivity, beta-agonist, nitrofurans, chloramphenicol, other antibiotics, staphylococcal enterotoxins, E.coli O157:H7, salmonella, listeria monocytogenes, vancomycin resistant enterococci, campylobacter, parasites and anthrax contamination.
Seafood and seafood products	Heavy metals, preservatives and additives, formaldehyde, sulphur dioxide, radioactivity, nitrofurans, chloramphenicol, other antibiotics, marine toxins, salmonella, vibrio, noroviruses, hepatitis A and other viruses, parasites, allergen (histamine) and anthrax contamination.
Vegetables and fruits	Pesticide residues, sulphur dioxide, E.coli O157:H7, salmonella, listeria, anthrax contamination, parasites and heavy metals.
Processed food	Micro-organisms, synthetic organic colours, Sudan dyes, chemical preservatives, artificial sweetening agents, mycotoxins, heavy metals, migration of metals, antioxidants, 3-monochloro-propane-1, 2-diol, 1,3-dichloropropanol, polychlorinated biphenyls, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, formaldehyde, residual chemicals in food-contact articles, migration of chemicals from food-contact articles, ethyl carbamate, N-nitrosamines, mineral hydrocarbons, bromate, pesticide residues, drug residues, radionuclide contaminants, trihalomethanes, screening of irradiated food, poisons and adulterants, and food proximate.

Source: Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (2005a).

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24. 全體政府獸醫：《全體政府獸醫提交的意見書》，2005年，為2005年11月29日食物安全及環境衛生事務委員會與環境事務委員會舉行的聯席會議提供的文件，立法會 CB(2)541/05-06(01)號文件，網址：<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr05-06/chinese/panels/fseh/papers/feea1129cb2-541-01-c-scan.pdf> [於2005年12月5日登入]。
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