

**For discussion
on 13 October 2006**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Policy Initiatives of
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau for 2007**

Purpose

The Government's new and on-going initiatives over the next year are presented in the just published 2007 Policy Agenda. This paper elaborates on the initiatives affecting the Bureau in the 2007 Policy Agenda. It also gives an account on the position reached on initiatives relating to food safety and environmental hygiene covered in the 2006 Policy Agenda.

2007 Policy Agenda

Caring and Just Society

Mission and Vision

2. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) is committed and accountable to building a caring and healthy society. Our mission is to ensure the well being of the community and to build a healthy and caring society. On the food and environmental hygiene fronts, public health protection should always take precedence. We are thus firmly committed to assuring the safety and quality of our food and providing quality environmental hygiene services to achieve a clean environment for the community.

Strategy

3. Our strategy is to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach in food chain management and, a coherent, effective and dynamic food policy based on scientific evidence and risk analysis (such as drawing up standards and ensuring compliance through enforcement), with a view to satisfying as far as possible the wish of consumers to enjoy a wide variety of foods; and to enhance private-public partnership and participation by stakeholders in the process.

Initiatives

4. In achieving our goal on food safety, we aim to implement the following new initiative in 2007 and beyond.

Study ways to collaborate with the Mainland authorities concerned on the application of modern information technology in effective tracking and tracing of the food supply chain to facilitate source management in order to enhance food safety control

5. To further strengthen the mechanism for tracking and tracing the origins of food supplied to Hong Kong, we are working with the Mainland authorities to explore the feasibility of applying Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technique in tracking Mainland food and food animals supplied to Hong Kong. At present, we are engaged in exploratory exchanges in respect of technology and operations and studying the feasibility of conducting a pilot project. To implement the project, we have formed an inter-departmental working group to collaborate with the Mainland authorities concerned to work out content of the project. The working group is represented by HWFB, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, and the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer.

Progress Report on Implementation of 2006 Policy Initiatives

(a) Establishment of the Centre for Food Safety

6. To enhance food safety, we established a Centre for Food Safety (CFS) in May 2006 under the FEHD and appointed a Controller to formulate and implement effective food safety measures for the protection of public health. The CFS has commenced its operation to strengthen its capacity in the following areas: food surveillance and sampling; handling food complaints; liaising with the relevant Mainland and overseas authorities; reviewing and updating food standards; and conducting risk assessment and communication.

7. To facilitate communication between the Government and the industry as well as consumers, the CFS has held regular consultation forums with the industry since July. The forums are intended to serve as an interactive platform for the Government to brief the industry on the latest developments in food safety initiatives and seek its feedback, while the trade

can also express its views on subjects of concern. The second trade consultation forum was held in October. The CFS has also set up a Consumer Liaison Group in August to strengthen its liaison with the general public and to consult them on food safety issues.

8. To strengthen the consultative framework on food safety, the CFS has set up an Expert Committee on Food Safety in mid-September 2006, with members drawn from academics, professionals, food experts, trade and consumer representatives as well as experts from other fields. The Expert Committee will advise the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene on the formulation of food safety measures and the review of food safety standards. The Committee convened its first meeting in October 2006.

9. To be more efficient in conducting food tests, we are planning to establish a specialized food testing centre under the Government Laboratory (GL) in the coming year, to enhance its work in food chemical analysis. This would be done through rationalising the GL's existing and limited additional resources.

(b) Formulating measures to streamline food business licensing.

10. We have continued our efforts in streamlining food business licensing procedures. A number of improvement measures have been implemented, such as the relaxation of certain licensing requirements which do not pose food hygiene problems and the streamlining of the workflow of the food business licensing regime. We will explore the feasibility of further streamlining measures and will consult the trade and the Panel where appropriate.

(c) Regulate restricted restaurants to safeguard public health

11. We have already submitted an information paper to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene setting out the salient features of the proposed framework for regulating restricted restaurants (previously referred to as private kitchens). We are preparing legislation to regulate restricted restaurants. As the proposed licensing regime requires amendments to various legislation in addition to the Food Business Regulation, more time is needed for drafting. We intend to introduce the Amendment Regulation in 2007.

(d) *Launch an accreditation scheme for seawater suppliers and draw up legislative proposals to prohibit the abstraction of seawater from specified areas along the coast for keeping live seafood to enhance the quality of fish tank water for food safety*

12. The voluntary Quality Seawater Assurance Scheme was launched in January 2006 after consultation with LegCo and the trade. The Hong Kong Productivity Council was appointed by the Government as the Accrediting Body to develop and administer the Scheme for an implementation period of three years. Under the Scheme, seawater suppliers who comply with the accreditation criteria would be accredited and issued an accreditation certificate, and seafood restaurants/sales outlets which utilize a clean source of water, e.g. seawater supplied by an Accredited Quality Seawater Supplier, can also be accredited and be given a logo for posting on their business premises.

13. As of end September 2006, a total of about 120 premises were accredited under the Scheme. These accredited facilities include seawater suppliers (the Fish Marketing Organization at Aberdeen, Cheung Sha Wan and Kwun Tong) and seafood wholesalers/retailers such as supermarket chains, seafood restaurants and sales outlets. There are about 50 applications pending accreditation at the moment.

14. For more effective control of the quality of fish tank water, we have proposed to this Panel in April 2005, to amend the Food Business Regulation to prohibit the abstraction of sea, water from areas as specified in a schedule. Data collected by the Environmental Protection Department on marine water quality revealed a consistently high level of *E.coli* in waters in (a) the Victoria Harbour, (b) typhoon shelters, (c) areas surrounding Hong Kong Island, including Ap Lei Chau, and (d) the western side of the New Territories. We propose to prohibit the abstraction of seawater from these areas for the purpose of keeping live seafood for human consumption.

15. In July and August 2006 we conducted several consultation sessions with the trade, and members of the District Councils and Area Committees on the proposal. The intent of the proposed legislation was explained and the areas where abstraction of seawater would be banned were highlighted. The trade and the district representatives were generally supportive of the proposal. Our plan is to introduce the Amendment Regulation in 2007.

(e) Developing a multi-pronged strategy to minimize the risk of avian influenza outbreaks, including the development of a poultry slaughtering and processing plant.

16. We have put in place a comprehensive avian influenza preventive and surveillance programme in Hong Kong since 1998. Both the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Lancet, a renowned medical journal, have commented that our preventive and surveillance programme is one of the most advanced systems that they have seen.

17. In response to a call by the WHO for regional Governments to review the fundamental modes of operations of the poultry industry, including production, marketing and sales, we have introduced a voluntary surrender scheme for live poultry farmers, wholesalers and retailers. Under the scheme, we offer ex-gratia payment or financial assistance to those who surrender their licences/market tenancies and cease live poultry trading on a permanent basis. The scheme has expired in August 2006. To date, about 80% of live poultry farmers, 17% of wholesalers and 42% of retailers have surrendered or applied to surrender their licences/market tenancies to the Administration. The scheme has brought the current maximum licensing capacity of local poultry farms to well below two million and reduced the risk of avian flu outbreak amongst the local poultry. To further lower the risk of such outbreak amongst backyard poultry, we have enacted legislation last February to ban backyard poultry keeping.

18. Another measure to minimise the risk of human infection of avian influenza is to develop a poultry slaughtering and processing plant to centralise all poultry slaughtering activities. We have identified a suitable site at Man Kam To Road, Sheung Shui, for the plant and consulted the North District Council this month. We will then conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment study, and initiate an Invitation for Expression of Interest exercise to ascertain market interest and collate views of prospective operators on the operational and commercial arrangements for the project. We will conduct a formal tender exercise and introduce a Bill into the Legislative Council in 2007 to provide a regulatory framework for the operation of the plant. We expect that the plant could come into operation in 2009/10 at the earliest.

(f) Draw up proposals to promote sustainable development of the fishing industry and to conserve fisheries resources in Hong Kong waters

19. We have set up a Working Group on Fisheries Management to examine the proposed fisheries management measures, including the

viability of introducing a fishing licence system and the related issues, designation of fisheries protection areas, and implementation of an annual closed season when necessary. The working group, which drew its members from representatives of fishing industry, academics and environmental protection groups, has held three meetings to discuss the proposed measures. To promote the sustainable development of the fishing industry, we have increased the approved commitment of loan capital of the Fisheries Development Loan Fund from \$100 million to \$290 million to provide loans for fishermen to switch to sustainable fisheries or related operations, and for mariculturists and pond fish farmers to develop sustainable aquaculture business so as to conserve fisheries resources. Moreover, we have also set aside \$60 million for loans to help fishermen tide over the annual closed season in South China Sea and prepare for the resumption of fishing activities after the closed season. The Administration will also set up a committee comprising of academics and experts in the fields of fisheries, marine ecology, financial economics, social science and environmental protection, as well as Legislative Council members and fisheries trade representatives to study the long-term policy for fisheries development that can maintain a viable balance between conservation of fisheries resources and development of the industry. The committee will study the approach for long-term and sustainable development of the fisheries industry in Hong Kong and propose viable development strategies and proposals for our consideration.

(g) Improve overall food safety and control on agricultural and fisheries operations that have an impact on public health or the environment

20. To ensure the safety of locally produced vegetables, the AFCD has launched a voluntary registration scheme for local vegetable farms engaged in commercial food crop production. To date, it has registered about 1 400 local farms. The AFCD will educate these local farmers on the proper ways to apply pesticide and assist them to cultivate vegetables in a safe and hygienic manner in order to protect public health. The FEHD has also strengthened communication with the Mainland authorities concerned and continued to monitor Mainland vegetables supplied to Hong Kong, through the registration system for Mainland vegetable farms that supplied produce to Hong Kong. As regards local fish farms, the existing regulatory control of local marine fish farms is operating smoothly; the Accredited Fish Farm Scheme has also gained general support from the public and the trade. The focus of our work in future would be on how to regulate the importation of live fish. Any regulatory framework must take into account the need for effective enforcement and the need to maintain the choices of fisheries products for the community. To enable us to introduce new measures which

would deliver actual results, we will consult widely once we have developed a concrete proposal on the matter.

(h) Review the regulatory framework for animals and birds for the purpose of enhancing health and food safety

21. To address the problems of public health and environmental pollution caused by local pig farms, we have launched a voluntary surrender scheme in June 2006 for local live pig farmers and their workers that offered ex-gratia payment or financial assistance to those who ceased their operation permanently. To date, about one third of all 265 live pig farms in the territory have surrendered or applied to surrender their licences to the Administration. In the meantime, we will step up enforcement to ensure that pig farms that choose to continue their operation would comply with the relevant standards and practices to minimize the risks to public health and the environment.

(i) Improvements to food labelling scheme

22. We will discuss with the trade about the details of the proposed food nutrition labelling scheme to ensure that its features will meet the demands of different parties when it is launched.

(j) Review the policies related to the provision of cemeteries, columbaria and crematoria facilities and strive to provide more facilities to meet future demand

23. In November 2005, we consulted this Panel on the result of our review on the provision of columbaria and crematoria (CC) facilities, our plan to construct additional niches in existing cemetery / columbarium sites and to upgrade or replace some of the existing cremators by phases, so as to enhance the overall cremation capacity to meet increasing public demand for CC service in the longer term.

24. We provided a total of 7 000 niches for public use in 2005-06. We have planned to provide more niches and upgrade or replace 17 cremators in the next few years after consultation with the District Councils concerned. Some District Councils raised objection to CC development plan during consultation in the last few months. As there will be a serious shortage of niches if no additional columbarium is to be developed, we will provide detailed plans together with proposed solutions (e.g. revise the design) to District Councils to address their concerns.

25. We will further explore the feasibility of inviting non-Government sector including the private sector to develop private crematoria / columbaria

for use by the public to help meet the public demand for CC services, widen public choices and improve service quality.

Conclusion

26. We will consult the LegCo FSEH Panel when we have formulated detailed proposals in respect of our new and on-going policy initiatives for implementation.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
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