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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 10 February 2009**

**Operation of the Pest Control Section under
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department**

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene (the Panel) on the operation of the Pest Control Section under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD).

Background

2. In a bid to strengthen the services of the Pest Control Section in various districts, FEHD has set up pest control roving teams since 2003 through outsourcing of services to augment the work of some 670 front-line in-house staff working in the district pest control teams. At present, the contractors have employed about 1 400 people who are deployed into a number of roving teams for providing pest control services in 19 districts.

3. FEHD has recently completed a review on the structure of the Pest Control Section with a view to ensuring that its services are effective. According to the Administration, the sphere of responsibility of in-house pest control teams and that of contractors' pest control roving teams will be made more clearly delineated. FEHD intends to increase the number of Foreman grade staff to enhance front-line inspection duties and to engage Health Inspectors in performing district liaison and publicity work to better mobilise the public in preventing pests and vector-borne diseases. The manpower of both the front-line in-house pest control teams and that of the contractors will remain unchanged.

Past discussions

4. At the meeting on 9 December 2008, the Panel received views from three staff associations on the operation of the Pest Control Section as follows -

- (a) FEHD should cease to outsource its pest control services to safeguard

public health as unlike civil servants, contractors' workers were not allowed to enter private premises to carry out pest control work;

- (b) the non-civil service contract (NCSC) staff in the Pest Control Section should be converted into civil servants as the former had mostly been employed by FEHD for over 10 years; and
- (c) FEHD should address the serious shortage of frontline staff in its Pest Control Section which had resulted in the growing number of occupational injuries.

5. The Administration responded that -

- (a) FEHD had never outsourced its pest control services in the past in the sense that no in-house workers had been displaced as a result, and the Department had no plan to do so in the future under the current review. The pest control roving teams serviced by contractors were set up to augment the services of in-house pest control teams, following the occurrence of dengue fever in Hong Kong in 2002. The contractors' roving teams and in-house teams worked together to provide comprehensive pest and mosquito control services in the territory. This mode of operation had been working well thus far;
- (b) the fact that contractors' workers were not allowed on their own to enter private premises to carry out pest control work should not compromise public health, as each roving team would be led by Foremen staff who were civil servants and were authorised to enter private premises, where necessary, to carry out pest control work. Normally, most frontline staff were not required to enter private premises. Such a need arose mainly in the course of dealing with certain complaints;
- (c) the deployment of and need for Workmen II in the delivery of pest control services were being actively reviewed by FEHD. Requirement, if any, would first be met through in-service recruitment, and where necessary, approval from the Civil Service Bureau for open recruitment would be sought in accordance with existing procedures to meet services needs. The Department would take into account relevant concerns, including views expressed by the staff side, in this regard; and
- (d) FEHD attached great importance to the occupational health and safety of its employees, including civil servants and NCSC staff. As an illustration, a large scale tool-box demonstration was organised by the Department last year to raise frontline staff's awareness of occupational health and safety and educate them about ways to prevent occupational injuries.

6. Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung questioned whether a small number of Foremen staff (slightly over 100) was adequate to lead 1 400 contractors' workers and enter private

premises to conduct investigation.

7. The Administration pointed out that contractors' workers performed their duties in accordance with prescribed working procedures and programmes which were mainly in public areas and, in the vast majority of cases, their work did not involve entering private premises.

8. Hon LEE Cheuk-yan requested FEHD to give an assurance that it would fill the posts vacated by in-house pest control staff to maintain the number of existing staff at 670. Hon Cyd HO also requested FEHD not to deploy staff from other service units of the Department to fill the posts vacated by the in-house pest control staff to maintain the latter's staff establishment at 670. FEHD advised that it had no plan at this stage to change the number of existing in-house pest control staff.

9. Hon WONG Yung-kan, Hon WONG Yuk-man and Hon Cyd HO urged FEHD to first consider workers of contractors' pest control roving teams and recruit them as civil servants to fill posts vacated by staff of in-house pest control teams.

10. The Administration pointed out that in accordance with civil service policy, civil service vacancies had to be filled through an open, fair and competitive recruitment process. For recruitment for Workman II posts, where necessary, approval from the Civil Service Bureau for open recruitment would be sought in accordance with existing procedures to meet services needs.

Relevant papers

11. Members are invited to access the Legislative Council's website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the relevant papers and minutes of the meeting.