

**For Discussion
on 3 April 2009**

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Control on Vegetables Imported from the Mainland**

Purpose

Recently, there were reports and claims from vegetable traders alleging that some vegetables imported from the Mainland may come from improper sources and may have food safety concerns. This paper briefs Members on the measures taken by the Administration on the control of vegetables imported from the Mainland, and the actions taken in response to the reports.

Supply of Vegetables

2. In 2007 and 2008, a stable supply of about 600 000 tonnes of vegetables were imported into Hong Kong annually, of which over 90% were from the Mainland.

Food Safety of Vegetables

3. The Government is very concerned about the food safety of vegetables for supply to Hong Kong. The Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) provides that all food on sale in Hong Kong must be fit for human consumption. According to the administrative arrangement between the Government and the Mainland authorities, stringent requirements on various aspects are imposed under the management system established for the safety of vegetables. Management started at source, with the establishment of a system of registered farms as well as collection and processing plants supplying vegetables to Hong Kong. Registered farms are subject to stringent control on the use of pesticides. Staff of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) inspects registered Mainland vegetable farms every year, and the latest inspection was conducted on 16 to 17 February 2009.

4. Apart from the requirement that vegetables supplied to Hong Kong must come from registered farms, each consignment of vegetables imported from the Mainland must be accompanied with a “供港澳蔬菜農藥使用報告單” (certificate of pesticide usage for vegetables supplied to Hong Kong and

Macao) and a “供港澳蔬菜檢驗檢疫監管卡” (inspection card of vegetables supplied to Hong Kong and Macao) issued by the Mainland authorities, and affixed with a label with information on the source of the vegetables on the packaging (e.g. basket or carton). The Mainland authorities also supervise the loading process, mark the vegetable consignments and seal up the vegetable vehicles to prevent the vegetables from being mixed with vegetables or other articles from unknown sources in the course of transportation.

5. In order to establish a more effective border monitoring system, vegetables supplied to Hong Kong by land must be imported via the designated Man Kam To Control Point (MKTCP). The Shenzhen Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureau (SZCIQ) will check the seals of the vehicles at Man Kam To (MKT) and inspect the vehicles on a random basis, by unpacking the consignments to verify the type and quantity of the vegetables. On the Hong Kong side, when inbound vegetable vehicles arrive at the Man Kam To Food Control Office (MKTFCO), officers of the CFS will conduct random inspection to check whether the seal on the vehicle remains intact and whether the consignment tallies with the accompanying documents, inspect the vegetables and take samples for quick tests for pesticide residues and comprehensive chemical analysis.

6. The CFS has been working closely with the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) in exchanging intelligence and conducting joint operations at the MKTCP. In 2008, the CFS inspected about 28 000 vegetable vehicles at MKT and there was no report of cases involving vegetable sources not tallying with the accompanying documents. During the same period, about 17 700 vegetable samples (with 74% from import level) were taken for testing of pesticide residues. With four of them found to be unsatisfactory, the passing rate of test results is 99.9%. Regarding the samples with unsatisfactory results, the CFS will take follow-up actions which include tracing the sources of the vegetables, putting on record the information of the farms concerned and informing the respective Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureau for follow-up actions. For future vegetable consignments from the relevant farms, they will be detained for testing and will be released only when satisfactory results are obtained.

7. Regarding the information provided by the trade and media about vegetables that may be imported from improper sources, we have actively taken a number of actions on various aspects. First, the CFS has increased the number of vegetable vehicles to be inspected and vegetable samples to be taken for testing. From January to March 2009, about 12 300 vegetable vehicles were inspected at MKTCP and there was no report of cases involving vegetable sources not tallying with accompanying documents. Furthermore, the CFS has

taken about 3 700 vegetable samples for testing of pesticide residues during the period from January to February 2009 and the results have all been satisfactory so far.

8. In view of the recent reports on the import into Hong Kong vegetables from non-registered farms bearing illegally obtained labels of vegetable sources, the CFS in late March took 63 vegetables samples at MKT for testing of pesticide residues from vegetable vehicles suspected of transporting vegetables from questionable sources and retail outlets suspected of selling vegetables from questionable sources. All results were found to be satisfactory.

Distribution Arrangement of Vegetables

9. Imported vegetables can be distributed through direct sale or wholesalers, both are operated on commercial basis in a free market environment. Whether to distribute vegetables through wholesalers has nothing to do with the enhancement on protection of food safety. Under the free market policy, the distribution arrangement of imported vegetables after entering Hong Kong should depend on the supply and demand forces of the market.

10. In response to recent reports on possible food safety concerns involving vegetables imported from the Mainland which were not distributed through Government vegetable wholesale markets or the Vegetable Marketing Organisation (vegetables for direct sale), the CFS and C&ED conducted a month-long joint operation at the MKTCP in mid January in order to enhance efficiency of inspecting vehicles carrying vegetables, targeting in particular vehicles carrying vegetables for direct sale. During the operation, the CFS and C&ED inspected 114 such vehicles, examined the seals on them, checked the certificates of pesticide and inspection cards, and collected 209 vegetable samples for tests of pesticide residues. All the samples tested for pesticide residues were found to be satisfactory.

Liaison with the Mainland Authorities and the Trade

11. The Government has followed up on the claims from traders alleging that some vegetables imported from the Mainland may come from improper sources. Since the monitoring system of the Mainland authorities is involved, the Government has brought the matter to the attention of the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine and SZCIQ for their follow up actions.

12. The Government has all along been maintaining close liaison with the traders and is willing to meet with them again to discuss issues of their concern and try to help resolve their problems.

The Way Forward

13. The Government will continue to take appropriate measures to ensure food safety of vegetables supplied to Hong Kong and to keep in close contact with the relevant Mainland authorities and the trade. In the long run, in order to prepare for the enhanced inspection of imported food, the Government is planning the extension of the facilities at the MKTFCO. Furthermore, the second reading of the Public Health and Municipal Services (Amendment) Bill 2008, introduced to the Legislative Council on 5 November 2008, will be resumed on 29 April 2009. The Bill proposes to empower the authorities to make an order to prohibit the import or supply of problem food and order a food recall where the situation warrants for the protection of public health. Moreover, we will introduce the Food Safety Bill to the Legislative Council in the next legislative year to strengthen food safety control, which includes the mandatory registration scheme for food importers and distributors and the record keeping requirement, so as to enhance food traceability.

Food and Health Bureau

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

April 2009