

Information Paper

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Development of the Food Testing Industry in Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the Budget initiative to develop Hong Kong's food testing industry.

Food Testing

2. Hong Kong relies heavily on food imported from overseas, in particular the Mainland. Food testing on samples of imported food conducted by both the Government and the food traders is one of the key measures to ensure food safety. Given the importance of food safety and that the food trade has the primary responsibility to ensure that the food they supply is safe, there is plenty of room for development in the food testing industry in Hong Kong.

3. With the progressive setting of legal standards for various harmful substances in food (e.g. preservatives, colouring matter, pesticide residues, veterinary drug residues, and other food additives) in the coming years and the commencement of the law to empower the authorities to prohibit the import and supply of food and order a food recall, as well as commencement of the nutrition labelling requirements on 1 July 2010, the demand for testing services by the food trade would increase substantially in the future. It is estimated that some 2 000 000 tests might be required by the food trade each year when all the new food safety legislation has come into effect. Following the melamine incident last year, we note that many food importers and suppliers have engaged private laboratories to conduct testing of their food before they were put on the market shelves. We strongly encourage and support such action by the traders as it will safeguard consumers' interests and enhance confidence in the food industry in Hong Kong.

4. In addition to conducting food testing for our local food importers and suppliers, our laboratories also have the potential to

provide food testing services for food traders in the Mainland when much emphasis is now placed on food safety.

Facilitation and Support from the Government

5. The Hong Kong Accreditation Service (HKAS) under the Innovation and Technology Commission (ITC) is responsible for providing accreditation service to private laboratories. HKAS encourages the private laboratories to obtain accreditation which gives assurance on the reliability of results to specific tests and calibration they performed. For clients of laboratory services, using an accredited service ensures that the laboratory is competent in providing the service in accordance with international standards of practice.

6. The accreditation provided by HKAS is well recognised by both the private and public sectors. HKAS also promotes the acceptance of its accreditation in places outside of Hong Kong by taking part in international and regional cooperation of accreditation bodies and the multilateral mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs) administered by them. Through these arrangements, the services provided by laboratories accredited by HKAS are widely recognised in other economies.

7. At present, 13 local private laboratories have been accredited by HKAS for conducting various types of food tests. Other private laboratories may also enter the food testing market and obtain relevant accreditation from the HKAS if there is sufficient market demand for their services. It is estimated that some 20 local laboratories will be accredited for a more comprehensive range of food tests in the coming few years.

8. HKAS/ITC will continue to provide efficient accreditation service to private laboratories which apply for accreditation. In this regard, an additional amount of \$1.6 million per year will be provided to HKAS to strengthen its staffing support and for enhancing its accreditation service for food testing.

9. In addition to supporting service for laboratories provided by

the HKAS, the Government Laboratory (GL) would also assist by promoting the upgrading of private laboratories by sharing testing methods with them as well as conducting technical seminars, proficiency tests and inter-laboratory comparison studies on a more regular basis.

10. Furthermore, GL plans to outsource more of its regular food surveillance testing work to the private sector. The resources thus released will be deployed to conduct method development for new tests, to provide new testing services in support of food legislation to enhance food safety, to conduct testing work involving litigation, and to assist in contract management. In this regard, GL has already started, as a pilot scheme, to outsource some 22 000 food tests (including sulphur dioxide, preservatives and organo-chlorine pesticide residues) to accredited private laboratories in 2008-09. GL plans to increase the number to at least 77 000 in 2009-10 (about 50% of its regular food testing work, covering sulphur dioxide, preservatives, organo-chlorine pesticide residues and heavy metals, etc). The outsourcing of testing work to the private sector will provide more business opportunities for the private laboratories.

Quality Assurance

Accreditation by HKAS

11. HKAS provides accreditation service to food testing laboratories. To obtain accreditation, a food testing laboratory must be meeting the requirements of the International Standard ISO/IEC 17025 and be subject to rigorous on-site assessments and monitoring by a team of expert assessors. HKAS also organizes training courses, seminars and proficiency testing programmes to improve the standard of laboratory operation, and promotes the acceptance of test results from accredited laboratories.

12. Before granting accreditation, HKAS will send a team of experts to assess the competence of the applicant organisation in performing the activities to be accredited. Accreditation will only be granted if all the accreditation criteria are satisfied. The laboratories concerned would be asked to conduct testing on split/blind samples to

show their capabilities. The specific tests that a laboratory is accredited for by the HKAS are uploaded onto ITC's website for public reference.

13. Performance of accredited organisations are monitored through periodic on-site re-assessments, surprise on-site surveillance visits, proficiency testing programmes, monitoring of changes, and feedback from users of the accredited service. Mandatory reassessments are conducted one year after the granting of accreditation and at two-year intervals thereafter. Accredited laboratories are visited at least once a year and are required to participate in proficiency testing activity at least once every four years for each major sub-area of major disciplines.

Outsourcing Contracts of GL

14. Private laboratories undertaking outsourcing contracts from GL must be accredited by HKAS in the specific tests and maintain the accreditation status throughout the contract period. In addition, during the contract period, GL would implement a number of quality assurance measures including on-site audits and quality control means such as introduction of blind samples/split samples and control checks to monitor the performance of the contract laboratories including the quality of the test results.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to comment on the above.

Food and Health Bureau

**Innovation and Technology Commission
Government Laboratory**

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