

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Promotion of Local Agricultural and Fishery Products

Purpose

This paper outlines the Administration's work in enhancing and promoting local agricultural and fishery products.

Current Situation in the Agricultural and Fishery Sectors

2. With limited development of the local livestock industry due to environmental and public health concerns, the momentum of local agricultural production shifts to crop production. At present, there are about 2 000 local crop farms, engaged mostly in vegetable production. Most of these farms are small, each occupying on average 0.2 hectare (or 3 d.c.) of land.

3. Whilst most of the crop farms produce vegetables using conventional methods, some of them (15%) claim that they involve in organic farming. Amongst them, some 60 farms are certified as organic farms by the Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre (HKORC), a local independent organic certification organization. On the other hand, about 230 (12%) farmers practise safe use of pesticides and are accredited under the voluntary Accredited Farm Scheme operated by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). Total output of local fresh vegetables accounts for about 4% of the total consumption (by value).

4. As regards the fishery sector, total production of local capture and mariculture fisheries accounts for about 19% of the total marine produce consumption, while the output of pondfish accounts for about 5% of the total freshwater fish consumption.

5. At present, there are about 4 000 fishing vessels of various sizes. About 34% of the vessels operate mainly around the continental shelf north of the South China Sea, with the remaining 66% in Hong Kong's coastal waters. The estimated total catch in 2008 was about 158 000 tonnes valued at \$1.8 billion.

6. On aquaculture, Hong Kong's fish ponds cover a total area of 1 160 hectares, most of them situated in north-west New Territories. In 2008, total pondfish production

was 2 266 tonnes at a value of \$41 million. On the other hand, there are about 1 070 mariculturists in Hong Kong operating in 26 designated fish culture zones. Total mariculture production in 2008 was 1 370 tonnes valued at \$82 million.

Demand for Local Agricultural and Fishery Products

7. Consumers are becoming more health and environment conscious. With much higher transparency in local production standards and regulatory regime, consumers tend to have more confidence in the safety of local agricultural and fishery products. Besides, the freshly harvested local agricultural produce has much to offer in terms of taste and nutritional value. This gives the local agricultural and fishery products a significant edge over imports and provides a niche market for local farmers.

Technical and Infrastructural Support to Local Agricultural and Fishery Sectors

8. AFCD has been providing various training programmes, seminars, workshops and on-farm demonstrations to help farmers acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in crop farming and greenhouse production. The department also provides promotion service and on-farm technical advice to farmers and helps them solve technical problems that they may encounter in production. In addition, adaptive studies are also being conducted in the department's Tai Lung Experimental Station to improve growing methods, maintain soil fertility, prevent diseases and pests, and to select suitable plant varieties to raise farmers' productivity and quality of production.

9. To reduce labour cost and improve productivity, AFCD has also introduced and promoted to farmers various means of farm automation that are suitable for local use. In general, using large farm machinery like tractors, planting and harvesting machines are not practical in Hong Kong because of the very small plot size in the farms. Instead, small automatic machineries are more useful in raising farm productivity. Various kinds of machinery including cultivation tillers, wood-chipping machines and weeders have been introduced to farmers. The department is also running a trial scheme to lend the above-mentioned machineries to farmers and holding regular workshops on the safe use and proper maintenance on farm machinery. Furthermore, AFCD provides assistance to crop farmers in the improvement of communal irrigation and drainage facilities, as well as rehabilitation of fallow land. In 2009, the department has assisted 20 farmers to rehabilitate some 3.6 hectares of fallow agricultural land for farming.

10. As regards the fishery sector, AFCD has been identifying new fish species suitable for local production and with good market potential. Through talks, demonstrations, seminars, training workshops and technical leaflets, the department has also been introducing improved quality species to fish farmers, providing them with technical support, training and enhancing the technical and management skills of the fishery sector. Furthermore, fish health management programme and good aquaculture practices programme are introduced to help fish farmers prevent, diagnose and control fish diseases, as well as to promote to them improved husbandry techniques and good management practices. The department will continue to conduct studies on local fish fry production techniques, cooperate more with fish farmers in fry rearing trials, and invite experts from the Mainland and overseas to provide technical support and training to local fish farmers. In addition, AFCD is planning a professional training programme to be introduced during the fishing moratorium in 2010 covering topics such as capture fishery, aquaculture and fishery ecotourism.

11. Agriculture and fisheries related loan funds are administered by AFCD to make low-interest loans to crop farmers, fishermen and fish farmers. Such loan funds are provided to help crop farmers to install crop protective structures and purchase farm machines, seeds, fertilizers, etc. and to assist fishermen and fish farmers to develop sustainable fisheries, meet general operational needs and cope with the annual fishing moratorium in the South China Sea. Over the past three years (2006-08), a total of \$10.35 million of loans were extended to 183 crop farmers and some 2 000 fisheries related loans amounting to \$238.50 million were issued. In addition, urgent assistance is given to farmers and fishermen affected by natural disasters for early resumption of production through the Emergency Relief Fund.

12. To raise the quality and competitiveness of local agricultural and fisheries products, AFCD carries out different supportive programs for crop and fish farmers to cater for their different production modes and needs. They include:

(a) Accredited Farm Scheme

AFCD, in collaboration with the Vegetable Marketing Organization (VMO), has launched the Accredited Farm Scheme since 1994. The Scheme aims to promote the adoption of good agricultural practice and environmental-friendly production methods. Integrated pest management and proper use of pesticides are emphasized with a view to ensuring production of quality vegetables that are safe for consumption. Under the Scheme, AFCD monitors the participating farms' operation whereas VMO inspects their produce against the presence of pesticide

residues before marketing them to authorised retailers. Currently, there are 235 local farms accredited under the scheme.

(b) *Controlled-environment Greenhouse Technology*

Controlled-environment greenhouses are built with transparent plastic films or polycarbonate boards to provide an enclosed environment that enables the control of temperature, humidity and intensity of light for the optimal production of crops. AFCD has modified the greenhouse technology with reference to local conditions and promoted it to farmers for intensive production of high-value crops, such as white bitter cucumber, rock melon, mini-cucumber, tomato, sweet pepper, edible fungi, edible white chrysanthemum and lily flower. Currently, a variety of crops are grown under greenhouses with a total structure area of 18 000 m².

(c) *Organic Farming Support Service*

Organic farming is an agricultural production system that emphasizes on ecological management and produces crops in an environmentally friendly and sustainable manner. It works in harmony with nature and preserves biological diversity. Chemical pesticides, fertilizers or genetically-modified seeds and materials are not allowed in the crop production process. Since December 2000, AFCD has been providing active support to farmers engaged in organic farming. This includes providing technical support to local organic farms and assisting farmers in overcoming technical problems concerning pest and disease control, horticultural skills, soil fertility management, seed saving, etc. Currently, a total of 130 vegetable farms, with the acreage of cultivation in 55 hectares, have participated in the Organic Farming Support Service provided by the department.

(d) *Promote Organic Certification*

As organic produce cannot be distinguished from conventional produce simply from external appearance, it is necessary to have an organic certification service in place to ascertain the organic status of a product. Organic certification service also plays a very important role in the promotion of local organic produce. With financial assistance from VMO and technical support from the Baptist University, HKORC was set up in 2002 to provide independent certification service and promote its organic seals to protect consumers. Since the certification service was launched in 2005, a total of 62 local organic farms have been certified.

(e) ***Accredited Fish Farm Scheme***

AFCD has introduced a voluntary Accredited Fish Farm Scheme to enhance the competitiveness of the local aquaculture industry. Participating fish farms under the scheme are required to adopt a set of good aquaculture practices with a view to raising the environmental hygiene standards of the fish farms and the quality of cultured fish. Quality assurance tests, including analyses of drug residues and heavy metals in fish, are conducted to ensure that all cultured fish meet food safety standards before they are sold in the market. Since the introduction of the scheme, a total of 88 fish farms (27 fish ponds and 61 mariculture farms), representing 12% of the total area of local fish farms, have registered under the scheme.

(f) ***Identification of New Species***

To meet the market demand for quality and safe food, AFCD has been identifying appropriate new species with good local market potential. After successful planting and culture trials, AFCD will promote these new species to fish and crop farmers. Quality species developed in recent years include red flesh rock melon, seedless water melon, yellow flesh water melon, silky gourd and organic strawberry, as well as jade perch in fish culture. These products are very well received in the market, and the demand often exceeds the supply.

Promote the Marketing of Local Agricultural and Fisheries Products

13. Apart from providing the above-mentioned support on production, AFCD also endeavours to help the two sectors promote the marketing of local agricultural and fishery products. AFCD organizes specific training for farmers on the operation of pick-your-own farm, as well as other sales planning and marketing strategies to assist them in exploring direct sales channels to consumers. The department also regularly publishes different publicity materials including pick-your-own guidebook, posters, bookmarks and a myriad of other souvenirs to promote local produce.

14. AFCD works closely with the Federation of Vegetable Marketing Co-operative Societies (FVMCS) - a local vegetable growers' association, in the promotion of co-operative movement among crop farmers in various farming areas. When small farmers face resources constraint and marketing difficulties and cannot enjoy economy of scale, co-operative movement among farmers helps to utilize resources more efficiently,

provide better institutional arrangement for marketing farm produce and facilitate group marketing services. Besides, co-operative societies may also run bulk purchase schemes for members in acquiring major farm commodities such as fertilizer and seedlings, which can lower the production cost of organic vegetables. To provide farmers the opportunity to sell their produce direct to consumers, FVMCS has set up a weekend farmers' market at Tai Po. Every Sunday, the market has attracted many enthusiastic consumers coming from all over the city to buy local organic produce.

15. In addition, AFCD works closely with VMO and Fish Marketing Organization (FMO) to promote local produce and develop good brand names by taking advantage of their extensive sales networks. Also, AFCD organizes and takes part in a variety of promotion activities such as large-scale carnivals, mass media advertisements, local and overseas food expos, small-scale food exhibitions and food tasting at supermarket chains and road shows at markets to let the public understand more about local agricultural and fishery products. These promotion activities can also publicise new crop varieties and signature species in season of individual agricultural areas in Hong Kong. On the other hand, FMO plans to promote quality local aquaculture products in the Mainland through the "Mainland/Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement" (CEPA).

16. FarmFest is a major annual event to advocate sustainable farming and promote local quality produce. The 3-day event features the biggest agricultural and fishery market ever held in Hong Kong with over 200 exhibition and sales booths as well as stage performances. It has established a reputation as an annual family carnival and has attracted an entry of over 100 000 people each year. The 4th FarmFest will be held in January next year with the participation of over 200 local farmers and exhibitors.

Way Forward

17. AFCD will continue to provide the necessary technical and infrastructural support with a view to assisting the agricultural and fishery sectors in the provision of quality and safe produce and enhancement of their productivity. On the marketing front, AFCD will collaborate closely with its partner organizations such as VMO, FMO, FVMCS, fishermen's organizations and HKORC in implementing various promotion programmes.

Food and Health Bureau

Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

December 2009