

Letterhead of Environment and Food Bureau Government Secretariat

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7 June 2000

Clerk to Panel
(Attn: Ms Doris Chan)
Legislative Council
8 Jackson Road
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Ms Chan,

LegCo Panel on Health Services

Thank you for your letter of 10 May 2000. The information requested by Members at the meeting on 8 May is set out below for your attention, please.

- (a) Progress of the Government's deliberations on the central slaughtering of chickens/poultry

We are studying the feasibility and implications of introducing centralized or regionalized slaughtering facilities for chickens. We aim to brief Members on the proposed way forward by end of this year.

- (b) The coordination mechanisms amongst departments concerned in conducting food surveillance and disease surveillance

Regular meetings are held between Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), Department of Health (DH), Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and Government Laboratory to exchange information obtained through FEHD's food surveillance, DH's disease surveillance and AFCD's surveillance on animal diseases, to critically review trends of food borne diseases, and to review and enhance prevention/control programmes targeted at such disease entities.

Members also asked specifically about interdepartmental coordination in the monitoring of water quality with a view to ensuring seafood safety. In general, Environmental Protection Department (EPD) monitors the local environment including rivers and marine environment and its emphasis is to detect long-term changes in water quality. It also monitors selected inshore sites which have been used for abstraction of seawater for keeping live seafood, and the results are provided to FEHD regularly. EPD will alert concerned departments should there be environmental problems which may lead to contamination of seafood. For example, if toxic algae are detected in the course of water quality monitoring, EPD will notify AFCD and FEHD of the finding.

AFCD, EPD and FEHD cooperate closely on red tide monitoring and management under the coordination of a Red Tide Steering Group chaired by Environment and Food Bureau. AFCD is responsible for collecting reports on sighting of red tide from individuals and other Government departments and conducting field investigations after receiving the reports. It also conducts routine phytoplankton monitoring programme at fish culture zones and selected channel and offshore stations to provide early warnings of red tides for mariculture.

AFCD will inform FEHD, EPD and mariculturists in affected and neighbouring fish culture zones of details of the red tide reports. If species of toxic algae are detected, FEHD will enhance its surveillance programme on seafood.

(c) An updated flowchart for the management of food hazards

An updated flowchart on the management of food hazards with explanatory notes is at **Annex.**

(d) The tightening measures proposed by the Bureau to address the problems of (a) people bringing meat into the SAR from the Mainland illegally; and (b) smuggling meat/poultry into Hong Kong

We have introduced legislative amendments to rationalize and tighten import controls on frozen/chilled meat and frozen/chilled poultry. The Reserved Commodities (Control of Imports, Export and Reserved Stocks)

(Amendment) Regulation 2000 and the Import and Export (General) (Amendment) Regulation 2000 were gazetted on 22 May 2000. Subject to negative vetting by the Legislative Council, they are expected to come into force on 1 August 2000. Under the latter Regulation, we propose to extend import licensing control to cover chilled poultry. The existing practice of subjecting frozen and chilled meat and frozen poultry to import licensing control but not chilled poultry is considered an anomaly from a public health perspective, because the smuggling of chilled poultry poses no less risk than that of frozen poultry, frozen or chilled meat.

In addition, the maximum penalty for importing frozen/chilled meat or poultry without an import licence will be increased from a fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment of one year to a fine of \$500,000 and imprisonment of two years. We anticipate that this will be a greater deterrent against the smuggling of frozen/chilled meat and poultry.

Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) and FEHD will step up their efforts in combating illegal imports of meat and poultry at the control points at the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region/Mainland land boundary and imported consignments by air and sea. When suspicious consignments are intercepted, they will take joint action to investigate. Offenders will be prosecuted for importing meat and poultry without proper official certificates and/or import licences. In addition, the two departments will discuss with their Mainland counterparts on how to curb the smuggling problem.

(e) The regular inspections and surprise checks conducted to the kitchens at food premises

There are some 16 600 licensed food premises in Hong Kong, including general restaurants, food factories, siu mei and lo mei shops and fresh provision shops. FEHD's health inspectors conduct regular and surprise inspections to these premises to ensure that they meet health and hygiene standards and are operated in compliance with the licensing conditions.

The average number of inspections per year to food premises in different categories under FEHD's classification system is set out below:

<u>Category</u> <u>(hygiene standard)</u>	<u>Frequency of inspections</u>	<u>Average number of</u> <u>inspections per year</u>
A (high)	Once every 8 weeks	10
B (satisfactory)	Once every 3 to 4 weeks	17
C (acceptable)	Once every 1 to 2 weeks	44

Among the inspections to each food premises per year, only one of them is a formal inspection of which the licensee will be notified the date and time beforehand. The main purpose of a formal inspection is to check that the layout of the premises complies with the approved plan. The licensee will not be informed of the date and time of the other inspections beforehand.

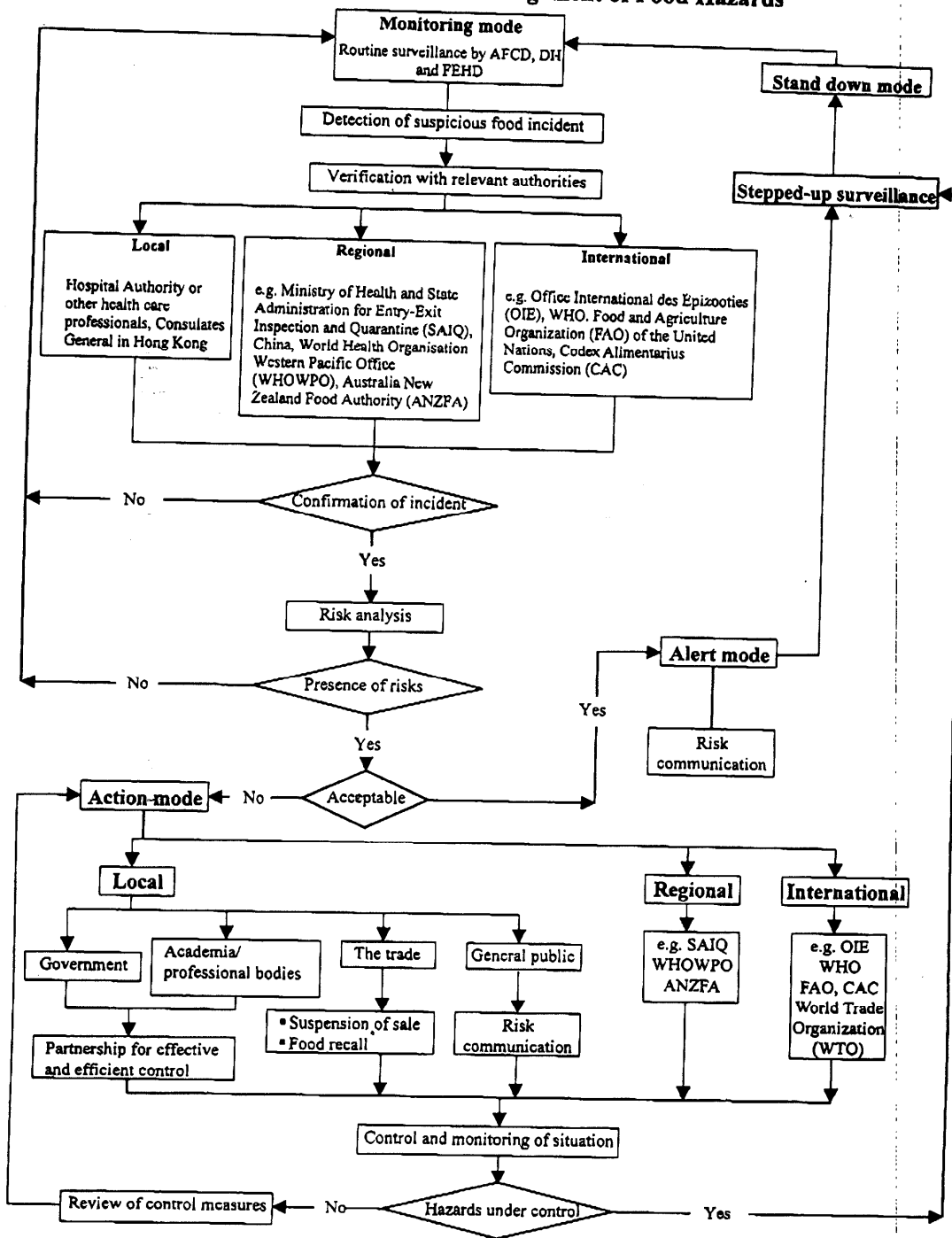
The Chinese version of this letter will be forwarded to you as soon as possible. Please let me know if any additional information is required.

Yours sincerely,

(John C Y LEUNG)
for Secretary for the Environment and Food

An Updated Flow Chart on Management of Food Hazards

Annex



An Updated Flow Chart on Management of Food Hazards

Explanatory Notes

In the flow chart, the term "food hazards" refers generally to problems in food which will affect its fitness for consumption. The following are some typical examples of "food hazards" –

- (a) unsatisfactory findings in routine food surveillance;
- (b) local food poisoning cases; and
- (c) media reports about overseas food safety incidents pointing to the possibility of food poisoning outbreaks and food recalls.

2. All these food hazards warrant different levels of action by Government departments and other organizations. The steps in managing these food hazards are set out in the flow chart and described below:

- (i) Under normal circumstances, the **monitoring mode** is applicable. Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), Department of Health (DH) and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) carry out routine surveillance on animal diseases, human diseases and food.
- (ii) If any food incidents are noted in the course of routine surveillance, the relevant department(s) will verify the incidents with local, regional or international authorities as appropriate.
- (iii) If the incidents are subsequently found to be invalid, the **monitoring mode** will be resumed.
- (iv) If the incidents are confirmed, FEHD will assess the extent of the risk to public health i.e. conducting risk analysis.
- (v) If the incident will not pose risks to public health, the **monitoring mode** will be resumed.

- (vi) If risks are present but at an acceptable level, all departments involved will switch to the **alert mode**. Surveillance will be stepped up and risk communication with the public will be initiated.
- (vii) If the risk is assessed as non-isolated and has territory-wide implications, the **action mode** will be adopted.
- (viii) Under the **action mode**, Government will communicate with local professional bodies and academia to collect their expert views on the problem. The trade will be asked to suspend the sale of the food in question or recall them from the market and consumers. The general public will be duly informed through risk communication.
- (ix) Regional and international counterparts will be informed and consulted as necessary.
- (x) FEHD and other relevant departments will continue to monitor the situation and ensure that the control measures are properly implemented.
- (xi) If the control measures fail to keep the food hazards under control, relevant parties will review the measures and design further means to tackle the problem. The **action mode** will continue.
- (xii) If the control measures can bring the hazards under control, relevant parties will go back to the **alert mode**. If the problem is solved, the **stand down mode** will apply. Subsequently, all parties will return to the normal **monitoring mode**.

New Arrangement in Investigating and Controlling Food Poisoning Outbreak

3. In the past, food poisoning outbreaks are investigated by DH with the assistance of the past Regional Services Department and Urban Services Department. To strengthen Government's work in this aspect, a dedicated team has been set up in FEHD to carry out the investigation and control work at

food premises in particular.

4. DH and FEHD work closely to investigate and control food poisoning outbreaks. DH conducts routine disease surveillance (including foodborne disease surveillance) and investigation of victims and their contact in food poisoning outbreaks. FEHD carries out investigations at the food premises involved.

5. After receiving food poisoning notifications, DH will promptly inform FEHD of the case and the food premises involved. DH will also start the investigation of the victims, other people who have shared the same food and the victims' contacts. It will deliver health education to the victims and other affected persons and institute disease control measures. FEHD will conduct field investigation at the respective food premises. It will take food samples for testing and dispose of or suspend from sale any food items which are suspected to be unsafe for human consumption. It will provide health education to the food handlers. If the food handlers are found to be likely to spread infectious diseases, they will be suspended from work. Prosecutions may also be instituted against the food premises.

7. The two departments will then exchange findings of their investigations and work together in ensuring the efficient dissemination of accurate information about the outbreaks.