For discussion
on 26 March 2001

LC Paper No. CB(2) 1148/00-01(03)

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

FOOD SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the food surveillance programme conducted by Food and Environmental Hygiene Department.

BACKGROUND

2. The Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) stipulates that all food on sale must be wholesome, unadulterated and fit for human consumption. Moreover, there is a set of subsidiary regulations, which stipulates standards for specific food products. A list of the relevant regulations is at **Annex A**. As part of the overall food safety control strategy, a food surveillance programme has been put in place for conformity checks to be performed on food products against prescribed standards or criteria.

THE FOOD SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME

Objectives

3. Food surveillance involves the ongoing collection, analysis and interpretation of data on food hazards. It serves two specific objectives –

(a) To assess whether food on sale is fit for human consumption –

food samples are taken and tested in order to protect public health against unsafe food; and

(b) To ascertain whether prepackaged food is properly labelled –

inspections are carried out to ensure that food labels comply with the labelling requirements prescribed in law and that the information given is truthful and accurate.

Collection of Food Samples

4. Under the food surveillance programme, food samples are collected at import, manufacture, wholesale and retail stages of the food supply chain. At present, priority is given to sampling the following food categories –

(a) food with specific standards stipulated in the law;
(b) food connected with previous food poisoning or other food safety incidents;
(c) food manufactured by or sold in previously convicted food premises; and
(d) food under complaint by the public.

5. Sampling priority is under constant review, taking into account latest overseas and local risk analyses.

Analysis of Food Samples

6. Chemical, microbiological and/or radioactivity analyses are conducted on food samples based on their inherent risks. Composition analyses are also carried out on prepackaged food to assess the truthfulness of the labels. While Government Laboratory is responsible for chemical, radioactivity and composition analyses, microbiological analyses are carried out by Institute of Pathology of Department of Health.

(a) Chemical Analysis

Chemical analysis mainly involves the testing of natural toxins, food additives and contaminants in food samples. For example, ciguatera is a well-known natural toxin in coral reef fish. Food additives are chemicals added to food products with specific purpose of improving their quality. Examples include sweeteners, preservatives and antioxidants. Contaminants are substances not intentionally added to food, but are present as a result of production, processing, packaging, transportation or environmental contamination. Examples are metals and dioxin.

(b) Microbiological Analysis

Microbiological analysis assesses the hygienic quality of food samples and the presence of specific pathogens. Hygienic quality is assessed through tests on overall bacterial and/or coliform organism counts. Pathogens are microorganisms that are known to be disease causing, such as Salmonella and Listeria Monocytogenes.

(c) Radioactivity Analysis

Radioactivity analysis measures radioactive substances contained in food samples so as to monitor the prevalent level of radioactivity in our food supply.

(d) Composition Analysis

Composition analysis finds out the ingredients and additives in food samples for establishing the accuracy of food labels.

Enforcement Actions

7. To complement our efforts in surveillance and public education, taking enforcement action and prosecuting offenders is also an integral part of our food safety control work. Based on the results of product inspection and/or laboratory testing, enforcement action is taken against those who import or sell food which does not comply with the legal standards. Enforcement action taken usually reflects the extent of impact on public health and may range from giving health advice, warnings, suspension of license and prosecutions.

FOOD SURVEILLANCE RESULTS OF 2000

8. In 2000, we have inspected around 55 000 food labels and 326 cases of contravention to the legislative requirements were found. We have also collected around 59 000 food samples for analysis. Out of the 58 133 laboratory results available so far, there were 398 failures, giving an overall failure rate of 0.7%. The overall situation is satisfactory as there was a general falling trend for failure rates in the past three years. A summary of food surveillance results in the past three years is at **Annex B** for Members' reference.

9. On the enforcement side, a total of 488 food surveillance

prosecutions, which covers failures to comply with food standards and contraventions to food labelling regulations, were laid in 2000. Of these, 343 cases had been heard with 335 convicted. The range of fines was between HK$300 and HK$10,000. Apart from prosecution, a total of 598 warning letters were issued.

IMPROVEMENTS OF FOOD SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME

10. Hong Kong has attained a high food-sampling rate. Comparing with the international reference of 3 samples per 1 000 population per annum, we have consistently achieved an intensity of more than 8 samples per 1 000 population per annum. While we would maintain the same high quantitative standard, more efforts are being directed to risk assessment and risk communication. Enhanced risk assessment provides the scientific basis for more meaningful interpretation of surveillance results. Improved risk communication conveys food surveillance results to consumers in a more proactive manner.

11. In 2000, we carried out topical risk assessment studies on surveillance results of four types of high-risk/seasonal food (which include sandwiches, sushi and sashimi, moon cakes and Chinese New Year foods). We widely publicized results of these assessments with a view to inform both the food trade and the consumers of the associated risk factors. We are encouraged that both these assessment studies and the half-yearly food surveillance results were widely covered by the local press. We shall continue our efforts in the enhancement of risk assessment and communication.

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
March 2001

Annex A

Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132)

Subsidiary Legislation with Prescribed Food Standards

1. Colouring Matter in Food Regulations
2. Dried Milk Regulations
3. Food Adulteration (Artificial Sweeteners) Regulations
4. Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) Regulations
5. Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations
6. Frozen Confections Regulation
7. Harmful Substances in Food Regulations
8. Milk Regulation
9. Mineral Oil in Food Regulations
10. Preservatives in Food Regulations

Annex B

FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL HYGIENE DEPARTMENT

FOOD SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME

ANNUAL SUMMARY 1998 - 2000

Type of Analysis	1998			1999			2000		
	Total	Unsatisfactory	Failure Rate(%)	Total	Unsatisfactory	Failure Rate(%)	Total	Unsatisfactory	Failure Rate(%)
CHEMICAL [1]	34 296	526	1.5	35 950	368	1.0	37 550	339	0.9
MICROBIOLOGICAL	19 070	112	0.6	18 261	82	0.4	18 748	59	0.3
MISCELLANEOUS [2]	1 115	0	0	1 329	0	0	1 835	0	0
TOTAL	**54 481**	**638**	**1.2**	**55 540**	**450**	**0.8**	**58 133**	**398**	**0.7**

Note:

1. Chemical analysis includes analysis of additives, contaminants, composition & labelling.
2. Miscellaneous analysis includes analysis of radioactivity measurement.