

**For discussion
12 July 2005**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Progress Report on the Implementation of the Code of Practice on
The Import and Sale of Live Marine Fish for Human Consumption**

Purpose

This paper is to update members on the progress of the voluntary Code of Practice (CoP) on the import and sale of live marine fish for human consumption since its introduction in mid-December 2004.

Background

2. At the meeting on 14 December 2004, members were briefed that the Administration would introduce a voluntary CoP to be adopted by the trade to prevent the occurrences of ciguatera fish poisoning. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) had developed in consultation with the trade a CoP which was implemented on 15 December 2004.

3. Under the CoP, fish traders are requested to -

- a) report every shipment of live coral fish to FEHD within 48 hours of arrival in Hong Kong;
- b) keep proper records of the source, supplies and distribution of live marine fish;
- c) avoid importation and sale of high risk fish; and
- d) immediately stop sale and recall suspected fish related to poisoning cases upon request by FEHD.

4. Notices were sent to traders, food premises and relevant trade associations on the implementation of the CoP in December 2004. Information on the CoP was uploaded to the website of FEHD and a reminder was sent to the trade in January 2005 to enhance awareness and compliance. The Agriculture,

Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) also assists in disseminating relevant information to the trade.

Progress Update

Reporting of Coral Fish Imports

5. The number of reports on shipment of marine (coral) fish has increased since implementation of the CoP in mid-December 2004. FEHD received 18 reports in the last two weeks of December 2004, compared with 27 reports in 2004 before the implementation of the CoP. More than 640 reports were received by FEHD in the first five months of 2005. The number of reporting companies has also increased to 13, compared with only 3 in 2004 before the implementation of CoP. The number of reporting companies and the number of reports received by FEHD before and after implementation of the CoP is summarized below at Table 1.

Table 1

Period	No. of Reports	No. of Companies Involved
<i>Before Implementation</i>		
2004 (Jan-14 Dec)	27	3
<i>After Implementation</i>		
2004 (From 15 Dec)	18	4
2005 Jan-May	644	13

6. Although the number of reports has increased after the voluntary CoP was introduced, the result is still far from satisfactory. Using past figures shown in the Hong Kong Trade Statistics from the Census and Statistics Department as the basis for estimation, we suspect that the volume of coral fish import reported to FEHD reflects only about 6 % of all live coral fish imported during the period.

Keeping Proper Records

7. There are more than 1 700 food premises and market stalls selling live marine fish. They have been checked for compliance with the CoP in terms of proper record keeping during routine inspection. The result suggests that more than half (55%) of the premises and stalls inspected were keeping proper records

according to the CoP. A significant proportion of the food premises (37%) was keeping only partial records while a small proportion (8%) did not keep any records.

Prevention of Further Occurrence of Ciguatera Fish Poisoning Cases

8. According to the Department of Health, there were 33 suspected ciguatera fish poisoning cases reported in the first six months of 2005 affecting a total of **105** persons. In most of these suspected cases, the relevant records were incomplete for tracing of the sources at one or more points in the supply chain. We have to rely on verbal information provided by the traders to trace the importers and distribution of the suspected fish. In some cases, the types of fish involved were uncertain as the information provided by various parties were inconsistent. Nevertheless, upon further investigation, it was found that a cluster of 11 cases (38 persons affected) were believed to be related to the same tail of large coral fish. The other 17 cases were considered sporadic and there was no evidence to suggest that the cases were linked to a common source. Table 2 below summarizes the occurrence of ciguatera fish poisoning in the previous years.

Table 2

Year	No. of cases	No. of persons affected
2002	18	60
2003	6	27
2004	65	247
2005 (Jan-Jun) (Provisional as of 2 July 2005)	33	105

Preliminary Assessment on the CoP

9. The number of reports received by FEHD and the number of companies submitting the reports are considered not satisfactory, although both have increased considerably when compared with previous years. Moreover, the incomplete record maintained by the traders had made it difficult for the Government to trace the source and the distribution network of the suspected fish.

Way Forward

10. As the response to the voluntary CoP has been less than satisfactory, we see a need to introduce additional measures to strengthen control on the import and sale of live coral reef fish so as to reduce the occurrence of ciguatera fish poisoning cases. The following measures are proposed -

- (a) To introduce a mandatory system to require fish traders to –
 - (i) obtain import permits before landing the coral reef fish in Hong Kong and provide relevant information on each lot of imported coral reef fish. Information such as the source of the fish, quantity, species, size and the distribution channel will be collected. All fish traders including importers, wholesalers and retailers should keep a copy of the import permit. Random check will be conducted to ensure the fish traded are accompanied by import permit.
 - (ii) keep proper records of the source and distribution of the coral reef fish to facilitate prompt and effective control measures in case of occurrence of ciguatera fish poisoning incidents. Random check will be conducted to ensure that the records are properly kept.

Failure to keep import permit and proper records will be an offence.

- (b) To designate a number of landing points where fish traders can import and distribute live coral reef fish. Information of the imported fish and the distribution channel will be collected at the designated landing points. This will enable us to trace the source of fish and the retail outlets when there is a ciguatera fish poisoning case.

When there is a case of ciguatera fish poisoning, the fish traders will be required to destroy the same batch of fish suspected to contain ciguatoxin.

11. To complement the above measures, we will step up publicity to advise the public the potential risk in consuming these fish and the measures which should be adopted to reduce the risk.

Other options

12. We have also examined a number of other options to reduce the occurrence of ciguatera fish poisoning.

Health Certificate

13. Importers of coral reef fish would be required to provide relevant documents to prove the source and the safety of their fish. However, there are practical difficulties in introducing such a system as many coral fish exporting countries do not have a system of issuing health certificate on coral fish. Besides, there is no quick and reliable ciguatoxin test at present. Further, the presence of ciguatoxin in fish is sporadic. Even with the most reliable tests, which take time to perform, negative ciguatoxin test result from a batch of samples does not imply that the other fish in the same shipment do not contain ciguatoxin.

Prohibition of Sale of Certain Species of Coral Reef Fish

14. Some countries like Japan ban certain types of high-risk fish species. While this approach is considered effective in preventing the occurrence of ciguatera poisoning, overseas experiences show that such a measure would bring about economic loss. Unless there is strong public support, we have reservation on introducing the proposal at this stage for the following reasons -

- (a) most of the fish species which had previous ciguatoxin records are very popular among local consumers. To ban the sale of these fish will deprive consumers' choice. As long as fish traders refrain from importing coral fish from high risk areas, the risk of further occurrence of ciguatera poisoning will be reduced;
- (b) a complete ban of the fish species which had previous ciguatoxin records may have serious impact on the business of seafood restaurants and fish trading industry.

It should be noted that ciguatera fish poisoning is a common problem in all countries where coral reef fish are consumed. The frequency of reported ciguatera fish poisoning incidents in a number of overseas countries is either higher than or similar to that in Hong Kong. There is no perfect system to prevent ciguatera poisoning as the presence of ciguatoxin in coral reef fish is sporadic. The most effective measure to prevent ciguatera fish poisoning is to avoid eating coral reef fish. Interventions are therefore targeted at reducing occurrence of outbreaks and communicating the risk to consumers for an informed choice.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to note the progress of the CoP and comment on the way forward as proposed in paragraphs 10 and 11. Subject to Members' comments, we will conduct consultation with the catering and fish trading industry and prepare necessary legislative amendments to effect the proposals.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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