

**For discussion
on 14 December 2004**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

A Mandatory Scheme to Regulate Coral Reef Fish

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the progress of implementation of a Code of Practice and the plan for implementing further preventive measures to address the problem of ciguatera fish poisoning.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A CODE OF PRACTICE

2. At the Panel meeting held on 13 July 2004, we proposed and Members agreed to adopt a two-phase approach to address the problem of ciguatera poisoning. Under the proposed two-phase approach, a Code of Practice will be developed in conjunction with the fish trading industry as a pilot scheme in the first phase, to be followed by a review to consider extending the pilot scheme to regulate other kinds of seafood.

3. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has developed a voluntary Code of Practice accordingly in consultation with fish traders and relevant catering associations.

4. Under the proposed Code of Practice, fish traders are required to provide information on each lot of imported fish to FEHD. Information such as the source of the marine fish, quantity, species and size will be collected. Fish traders will be asked to keep proper records of distribution of the marine fish to facilitate prompt and effective control measures in case of occurrence of ciguatera poisoning incidents. They will also be advised not to collect or import fish considered high risk for ciguatera fish poisoning.

5. FEHD has issued about 100 copies of the draft Code of Practice to traders including fish trading associations and catering associations for comment. A discussion forum was held on 29 November 2004 to exchange views and clarify the requirements in the Code. The trade supported the voluntary Code of Practice. We will implement the Code of Practice on 15 December 2004 and review its effectiveness in about six months' time.

FURTHER MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF CIGUATERA FISH POISONING

6. In view of the continuation of sporadic ciguatera poisoning cases, at the Panel meeting held on 26 October 2004, we further proposed and Members agreed to explore other options to strengthen control on live marine fish as longer-term measures to prevent ciguatera fish poisoning. Subsequently, we have explored the experiences in other countries such as Japan, Australia and Singapore, as ciguatoxic fish in Hong Kong mainly comes from the Pacific. It is noted that each of these countries has adopted a different approach in handling the situation.

Overseas Experiences

7. In Japan, the import and sale for human consumption of 10 high-risk fish species are banned. For another seven high-risk fish species, importers are required to provide certificates issued by relevant authorities of the exporting countries specifying that the fish has been taken from safe areas and that the fish does not contain ciguatoxin.

8. The Australian government has legislation to prevent certain fish species from being harvested in high-risk coral reef areas. They have stopped the export of certain high-risk fish species. They have also established a ciguatera working party to develop guidelines for the on-going management of the issue and had in place a quick response mechanism should new high-risk areas be located.

9. The Singaporean government can demand fish importers to prove that the fish being imported are safe for human consumption if they

suspect or know the fish come from a high-risk area.

Proposed Measures

10. At present, live fish is not defined as food under the relevant food safety legislation. We will review the existing regulations on fish and explore the feasibility to empower relevant Government departments to strengthen control of the import and sale of live marine fish. In addition, we propose the following mandatory measures for consideration.

Import Permit

11. Under the proposed scheme, importers of coral reef fish would be required to obtain import permits before landing the fish in Hong Kong. Importers of coral reef fish would also be required to provide relevant documents to prove the source and the safety of their fish. However, we need to explore further the practicality of requesting for health certificates as ciguatoxic fishes involve wild catches in the sea.

Designated Landing Points

12. Designated landing points where vessels can import and distribute live marine fish would be established to ensure that only those coral reef fish with import permits are imported. This will also facilitate the collection of information relating to distribution and sale of the live marine fish.

Mandatory Record Keeping

13. The record keeping as outlined in the Code of Practice would become mandatory. It will then be compulsory for importers, wholesalers and retailers to keep proper and accurate records of the import, supplies and distribution of the fish to facilitate monitoring and source tracing.

Recall

14. Under this proposal, a mandatory recall system would be set up. Government can recall and destroy fish suspected to contain ciguatera toxin in order to prevent ciguatera poisoning.

Prohibition of Sale of Certain Species of Coral Reef Fish

15. Taking reference from the overseas countries, consideration could be given to prohibit the import of certain high-risk coral reef fish species or fish coming from high-risk areas.

CONSULTATION WITH THE TRADE

16. Traders were also briefed on these proposed longer-term measures during the discussion forum on 29 November 2004. Further discussions will be held with the trade on the way forward in implementing these measures.

ADVICE SOUGHT

17. Members are invited to note the progress of implementation of the Code of Practice and comment on further measures proposed (paragraphs 11 – 15) to address the problem of ciguatera poisoning.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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