

**For discussion
on 17 October 2005**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Policy Initiatives of
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) for 2006**

Purpose

The 2006 Policy Agenda just issued lists the Government's new and on-going initiatives over the next two and a half years. This note elaborates, where applicable, on the initiatives affecting the Bureau in the 2006 Policy Agenda. Where necessary, it also gives an account on the position reached on initiatives relating to food safety and environmental hygiene covered in the 2005 Policy Agenda.

2006 Policy Agenda

Caring and Just Society

Mission and Vision

2. The HWFB is committed and accountable to building a caring and healthy society. Our mission is to enhance the well being of every member of the community to build a healthy and caring society. On food and environmental hygiene fronts, public health protection should always take precedence. We are thus firmly committed to assuring the safety and quality of our food and providing quality environmental hygiene services to achieve a clean environment for our community.

Strategy

3. Our strategy is to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach in food chain management (i.e. the implementation of the "From Feed to Table" concept) by putting in place the necessary infrastructure; a coherent, effective and dynamic food policy on the basis of scientific evidence and risk analysis (e.g. drawing up standards and ensuring compliance through enforcement); and to enhance private-public partnership and participation by stakeholders during the process.

Initiatives

4. In achieving our goal on food safety and environmental hygiene, we aim to implement a number of new initiatives in 2006 and beyond. These new initiatives are briefly described below.

Setting up the Food Safety, Inspection and Quarantine Department

5. In the light of the recent food safety incidents in Hong Kong, we plan to set up a new Food Safety, Inspection and Quarantine Department to further improve our work in this area by rationalizing the existing organization structure and responsibilities of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and the Food and Hygiene Environmental Department (FEHD). The details of the re-organisation are set out in a separate paper.

Formulate measures to streamline food business licensing

6. We have worked closely with the “Subcommittee to study the streamlining of food business licensing” under the Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene Panel (FSEH Panel) to review the food business licensing procedure. We have drawn up a number of improvement measures and are currently in discussion with the trade. We will propose further measures to streamline food business licensing procedures and will consult the Panel in due course.

Review the policies related to the provision of cemeteries, columbaria and crematoria facilities and strive to provide more facilities to meet future demand

7. As a result of our growing population and acceptance of cremation as the primary means of disposal of the deceased rate, there has been a very strong demand for columbaria and crematoria (CC) facilities. Existing CC facilities have been stretched to the limit in meeting the expectation and the demand of the public. All new government columbarium niches have been exhausted in mid-2005.

8. To tackle the problem of immediate shortage of niches, work is in hand to provide at several columbaria about 11,000 niches in 2006. To address the longer term need, we are conducting a review on the provision of CC facilities and will consult this Panel on the findings and recommendations of our review.

Progress Report on Implementation of 2005 Policy Initiatives

(a) Examine the feasibility of developing a medium-sized poultry slaughtering plant to reduce the risk of human infection of avian influenza

9. To minimize the risk of human infection of avian influenza virus, we have decided to implement regional slaughtering with a view to separating humans from live poultry. We have identified part of the floor area of the Western Wholesale Food Market for the development of a pilot poultry slaughtering plant. A consultancy study to explore the commercial viability of private sector involvement in the project is near completion. We will decide the way forward having regard to the recommendations of the study and consult relevant stakeholders when details of the project are drawn up.

(b) Regulate restricted dining places to safeguard public health

10. We have already issued an information paper to the FSEH Panel setting out the salient features of the proposed framework for regulating restricted dining places (previously referred to as private kitchen). We are preparing legislative amendments to the Food Business Regulations and we intend to introduce the Amendment Regulation in 2005–06 LegCo session.

(c) Launch an accreditation scheme for seawater suppliers and introduce legislation to prohibit the abstraction of seawater from specified areas along the coast for keeping live seafood with a view to enhancing the quality of fish tank water for protection of public health

11. We have appointed the Hong Kong Productivity Council as the Accrediting Body to develop and implement a voluntary “Quality Seawater Assurance Scheme”. Under the scheme, seawater suppliers who comply with the accreditation criteria can be accredited and be issued an accreditation certificate, and seafood restaurants/sales outlets which utilize a clean source of water, e.g. seawater supplied by an accredited seawater supplier, can also be accredited and be given a logo for posting in their business premises. We are consulting the trade and relevant stakeholders on the details of the accreditation criteria and we will introduce the scheme in the next few months.

12. In April 2005, we consulted FSEH Panel on a proposal to prohibit abstraction of seawater from specified areas along the coast for keeping live seafood for human consumption. Abstraction of seawater from the Victoria

Harbour, typhoon shelters, and the coast surrounding Hong Kong Island and the western side of the New Territories will be prohibited. We will consult the trade on the proposed measures shortly and will proceed with amending the Food Business Regulation thereafter.

(d) Develop a multi-pronged strategy to minimise the risk of avian influenza outbreaks

13. We have put in place a comprehensive avian influenza preventive and surveillance programme in Hong Kong since 1998. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has commented that our preventive and surveillance programme is one of the most advanced systems that they have seen.

14. Nevertheless, the WHO has warned that the recent poultry outbreaks in Russia and Kazakhstan were caused by a virus that has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to cross the species barrier to infect humans, causing severe disease with high fatality¹. We must therefore stay vigilant and continue to uphold our stringent measures on prevention and control of avian influenza outbreaks in Hong Kong.

15. In response to the call by WHO for Regional Governments to review the fundamental structure of the way in which the poultry industry operates, including production, marketing and sales, we have introduced a scheme to encourage live poultry farmers, wholesalers and retailers to surrender their licences or market tenancies and to cease live poultry trading on a permanent basis, so as to reduce the opportunity of direct human contact with live poultry. To date, about 26% of live poultry farmers, 7% of wholesalers and 33% of retailers have surrendered or are applying to surrender their licences/market tenancies to the Administration.

16. In the coming year, we will further step up our preventive and control efforts by reducing the current maximum licensing capacity of 3.7 million in local poultry farms to 2 million to further reduce the risk of human infection in Hong Kong.

(e) Draw up proposals to promote sustainable development of the fishing industry and to conserve fisheries resources in Hong Kong waters

17. We have drawn up proposals to promote sustainable development of the fishing industry and to conserve fisheries resources in Hong Kong

¹ http://www.who.int/csr/don/2005_08_18/en/index.html

waters, including the introduction of a fishing licence system, designation of fisheries protection areas (FPAs), and implementation of an annual territory-wide closed season if necessary. We held a comprehensive consultation exercise from December 2004 to March 2005, and briefed the FSEH Panel in March and April 2005.

18. In the light of the objections received, we are reviewing the position of the matter.

(f) Improve overall food safety and control on agriculture and fisheries operations that have an impact on public health or the environment

19. In August 2005, we amended the Harmful Substances in Food Regulations to prohibit the use of malachite green in food including live fish so as to further enhance the safety of freshwater fish supply for public consumption. In our subsequent discussions with the Mainland Authorities, it was agreed that freshwater fish for export to Hong Kong could only be provided by fish farms which are registered in the Mainland and approved by FEHD and that all freshwater fish supplied by these farms should be accompanied with certificates to certify that they are free from malachite green or any other prohibited and restricted veterinary chemicals. In addition, it was also agreed that Hong Kong could send staff to freshwater fish and aquaculture farms in the Mainland for inspection.

20. Separately, having regard to the various environmental pollution problems and public health threats caused by local pig farming activities, we have concluded that sustainable development of livestock farming is no longer a realistic long-term policy option. In this regard, we are actively considering the feasibility of launching a voluntary surrender scheme as requested by the pig farming trade.

(g) Review the regulatory framework for animals and birds for the purpose of enhancing health and food safety

21. Our existing legislation to regulate animals and birds was enacted some decades ago hence the provisions contained therein could not meet the present day demands. There is therefore a need to review our existing regulatory regime to see whether it should also cover live fish or fisheries products and other animals for food purposes such as amphibians, and animal products, fodder used for animals and birds, etc.

22. In the light of the recent malachite green incident, we are of the view that priority should be given to the regulatory regime for fisheries

products. We are also planning to update the regulatory control on poultry eggs in accordance with the latest guidelines issued by the World Organisation for Animal Health on prevention and control of avian influenza.

(h) Evaluate the implementation of the concept of “From Feed to Table” to ensure food safety

23. The implementation of the concept of “From Feed to Table” is an on-going effort which requires a constant review of the extent to which we are capable of implementing surveillance and regulatory measures at every critical point along the entire food supply chain. We believe that the proposed establishment of a new Food Safety, Inspection and Quarantine Department will go one step further towards achieving the objectives of this concept.

(i) Improvements to food labelling scheme

24. After conducting a public consultation exercise in 2004 on our proposal to introduce a food labelling scheme on nutrition information, we presented a revised proposal to this Panel to provide for a two-phase implementation approach.

25. In the coming year, we will continue to discuss with the trade on the implementation details and consider their views. FEHD will continue to develop a set of implementation guidelines in collaboration with the trade and organize workshops to facilitate compliance of the new labelling requirements.

Conclusion

26. We will consult the LegCo FSEH Panel when we have formulated detailed proposals in respect of our new and on-going policy initiatives for implementation.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
October 2005**