

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Strategy for Food Surveillance in 2007

PURPOSE

This paper briefs members on the strategy for the food surveillance programme to be adopted by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) in 2007.

THE EXISTING FOOD SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME

2. Food surveillance, together with control of imported food and food animals, management of food incidents and enforcement of food safety legislation are all essential components of the food safety control measures adopted by the CFS. The CFS adopts a risk-based approach in determining the types of samples to be collected, the frequency and number of samples for testing. In addition to food with specific standards stipulated by law, the CFS also keeps a close watch on food which was involved in food poisoning outbreaks and other food safety incidents in the past, as well as food produced or sold by food premises that have been previously convicted. Moreover, the CFS also takes samples of food that is the subject of public complaint or concern. Sampling priority is under constant review, taking into account latest overseas and local risk analyses. On a limited scale, the CFS has also been conducting ad hoc target-based surveillance which aims at enhancing knowledge relating to specific hazards in food. Intensive surveillance activities for particular food or hazard at various times of the year are also undertaken (for example, during festive seasons when large volumes of particular foods such as moon cakes, hairy crabs, Lunar New Year food, etc. are available for sale).

3. In general, the safety of food available in Hong Kong is maintained at a high standard. For instance, a total of over 64 000 food samples were taken for microbiological and chemical tests in 2006. The overall proportion of satisfactory samples was 99.7%. When compared with other overseas countries/places, Hong Kong has a higher number of samples tested per 1 000 population. The table below summarizes the number of food samples taken for testing in Hong Kong and other countries / places, showing

that our activities in food sampling are broadly in line with our international counterparts.

	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Republic of Korea</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Germany</i>
Number of samples (Year)	62 400 (2005)	40 000 ¹ (2003)	111 607 ² (2004)	38 000 ³ (2004/5)	4 700 ⁴ (2005)
Population (Thousand)	6 900	5 364	47 817	32 300	82 500
Number of samples (Per 1 000 population)	9.0	7.5	2.3	1.2	0.06

4. The main focus of the existing food surveillance programme is on conformity / compliance checks on food products against prescribed standards or criteria, as well as surveying long-term trends in the levels of chemicals, microbiological agents and nutrients in food. Since the surveillance result was released in the form of summary data, it does not provide the public with sufficient information on problems identified and the risks associated with those food or hazards that they are concerned with. The sampling size of individual food items is also inevitably restricted because of the sheer diversity of food items to be tested.

5. In recent years, however, there is a trend in many countries, for example, the US, Canada, Denmark, to shift from routine compliance surveillance to target-based surveillance with a view to generating more meaningful information and providing a preventive basis for interventions. This will facilitate gathering of sufficient and in-depth information to enable improvements to be made along the entire food chain.

PROPOSED STRATEGY IN 2007

6. To be in line with the international trend of putting more focus on target-based surveillance, the CFS has reviewed its strategy on food surveillance and proposes to adopt a more targeted and client-oriented approach. It is proposed that a three-tier approach to food surveillance be adopted.

¹ Food contamination monitoring and food borne disease surveillance at national level, Second FAO/WHO Global Forum for Food Safety Regulators, GF02/10 October 2004

² Presentation at the 4th International Workshop on Total Diet Studies, 23-27 October 2006 by Food and Drug Administration, Republic of Korea

³ Canadian Food Inspection Agency

⁴ Website of the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL), http://www.bvl.bund.de/nn_518594/EN/01_Food/05_LM_Monitoring_en/

Routine Food Surveillance

7. The CFS will continue to conduct routine surveillance on food available in Hong Kong and release the findings regularly. The findings will be presented by food groups (e.g. fruits and vegetables, meat, seafood, cereals), hazard groups (e.g. heavy metals, pesticides, veterinary drugs, pathogens) and food items or hazards that are of particular public concern (e.g. sudan dyes, carcinogenic chemicals) so that the public can have better information and understanding on the types of food and hazards being tested, as well as the testing results for each food or hazard group.

Targeted Food Surveillance

8. The CFS monitors food incidents, both locally and overseas, on a daily basis. The CFS checks daily media reports, the websites of various international and national food safety authorities, as well as media agencies to identify food incidents which may have implications for Hong Kong. The CFS also keeps in view risk assessments conducted by overseas and local authorities. Making use of the information available, the CFS will proactively conduct more surveillance targeted at specific food hazard and disseminate the related food safety information to the public and the trade. This would enable the CFS to undertake a more in-depth or focused approach on certain specified food items in accordance with the prevailing circumstances both locally and overseas. Given that surveillance on targeted-food is sometimes incident-driven, some lead time might be necessary for the announcement of results. The CFS has already commenced its targeted surveillance in 2007 on testing of formaldehyde in noodle fish as there has been concern of possible abuse of the use of formaldehyde in small fish, and nitrate and nitrite in meat as nitrite may react with chemical components in food (amines or amides) to form cancer-causing nitrosamines. Excessive use of nitrite can cause disease of the blood (methaemoglobinaemia).

Seasonal Food Surveillance

9. To facilitate consumers in making wise choices and the trade in taking appropriate measures, it is important to continue with our present system of conducting tests on festive or seasonal food, e.g. Chinese New Year food, rice dumplings at Tuen Ng Festival, mooncakes at Mid-Autumn festival, hairy crabs, etc. and provide the relevant information to consumers and the trade in a timely manner.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC AND THE TRADE

10. To strengthen the effective and efficient communication with the public on food safety risks, the findings from routine food surveillance will be released every two months or so in the form of a series of Food Surveillance Reports (e.g. 2007 Food Surveillance Report No.1/ 2007), through press briefings and the CFS website. In between, the results of targeted food surveillance will be released in the format of “Targeted Food Surveillance Report”, with information provided on the background and rationale behind the surveillance, interpretation of the findings, and very importantly, a key message on the local situation and corresponding advice to consumers and the trade. As for seasonal food surveillance, reports will be released in batches, if applicable, to provide the most timely information. An announcement will be made once the results of initial samples are available, and results of further samples will then be released shortly before the festival or season.

11. In addition to the variety of channels already in place for quick and timely communication with the stakeholders, including press release, press conference, media briefings, educational and informative materials (such as Food Safety Focus, Food Alerts, handbills), telephone hotline and CFS website, the CFS will also update the trade and provide them with relevant advice through the regularly held Trade Consultation Forum.

OUTSOURCING OF FOOD TESTING WORK

12. In addition, the Government Laboratory (GL) as a close partner of the CFS in undertaking its duties in food surveillance, is exploring the opportunities and feasibility to outsource to private laboratories part of the straight-forward analytical work which is unrelated to prosecution action, so as to free up GL’s resources for more complex and crucial analytical duties that require higher level of expertise in view of increased caseload of food incidents. In this connection, GL has commissioned a 6-month study to the Efficiency Unit starting January 2007 to identify outsourcing opportunities. Further details on the development should be available when the study is completed.

ADVICE SOUGHT

13. We will continue to review the sampling strategy to ensure the effectiveness of the surveillance programme in enhancing food safety control in Hong Kong.

14. Members are invited to note and comment on the proposal to enhance the food surveillance programme in 2007 and communication with the public on the testing results as described in paragraphs 6 to 11.

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