

**For Discussion
On 12 January 2010**

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Report on the Food Surveillance Programme of 2009**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the work of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) in respect of the Food Surveillance Programme of 2009 and reports on the major surveillance results for the period from January to November 2009 and the follow-up actions taken.

Introduction

2. The CFS formulates the food safety control strategy of Hong Kong according to the principle of “from farm to table” advocated by the World Health Organization. Control work at source includes monitoring and surveillance of imported food and live food animals. At downstream stages of the food supply chain, the Food Surveillance Programme is a key component of the CFS’s work to ensure food safety.

3. The Food Surveillance Programme aims to conduct testing on food for compliance with legislative requirements and safety for human consumption, with a view to minimising public health hazards of consuming unsafe food. Each year, the CFS draws up the Food Surveillance Programme based on risk analysis. The Programme is then finalised after being considered by the Expert Committee on Food Safety and having regard to the views of experts and stakeholders. The CFS will adjust the scope and intensity of food surveillance in a timely manner taking into account the test results and food incidents happened in various parts of the world.

4. Inspectors of the CFS take samples of food items at the import, wholesale and retail levels for microbiological and chemical testing for

assessing the risk. The Food Surveillance Programme covers the following three main areas:

- (i) routine food surveillance;
- (ii) targeted food surveillance;
- (iii) seasonal food surveillance.

In addition, the CFS also conducts surveys on popular local food items.

5. The CFS takes effective risk management actions against problem food, such as issuing warning letters, tracing the source and distribution, requiring the traders concerned to stop selling, recall and dispose of the problem food, as well as initiating prosecutions.

Routine Food Surveillance

6. Routine food surveillance covers major food groups such as fruits and vegetables, meat, poultry, aquatic products, milk and cereals. The types of testing range extensively from microbiological testing (covering pathogens and hygiene indicators) to chemical testing (including pesticides, veterinary drug residues, preservatives, colouring matters, metallic contaminants and biotoxins, etc.).

7. The CFS releases surveillance results to the public and the trade regularly in the form of Food Safety Reports. The results are presented in a concise and practical format, listed by food groups and hazard types. From 2009 onwards, Food Safety Reports are issued monthly instead of bi-monthly, so that the public and the trade can obtain the latest food safety information in a more timely manner. Apart from announcing surveillance results, the CFS also gives advice to the public to minimise health risks posed by problem foods.

Targeted Food Surveillance

8. Taking into consideration factors such as past food surveillance data, the non-compliant situations, food incidents happened in various parts of the world and the risks of different types of food, the CFS undertook a number of targeted food surveillance projects in 2009. As of November 2009, the CFS had completed the following surveillance projects and published the relevant reports:

- (i) Microbiological Quality of Lunch Boxes;
- (ii) Microbiological Quality of Prepackaged Food That Required Reheating Before Consumption;
- (iii) Sulphur Dioxide in Meat;
- (iv) Microbiological Quality of Ice-cream and Frozen Confections;
- (v) Sudan Dyes in Eggs and Egg Products;
- (vi) Microbiological Quality of Bottled Water.

Seasonal Food Surveillance

9. In 2009, the CFS continued to monitor and assess the safety of highly popular festive and seasonal food items and announced the results before each season and festival. As of November 2009, the completed projects included:

- (i) Chinese New Year Food;
- (ii) Rice Dumplings;
- (iii) Mooncakes;
- (iv) Hairy Crabs.

Survey on Popular Food Items

10. In addition to the above food surveillance projects, the CFS also conducted surveys on popular food items to assess the safety of commonly consumed food items which include:

- (i) Cart Noodles;
- (ii) Hong Kong Style Desserts.

Overall Results

11. In 2009, the CFS planned to take a total of about 65 000 samples for testing, i.e. about nine samples per 1 000 population. When compared with other overseas countries, Hong Kong has a relatively higher number of samples tested.

12. As of November 2009, the CFS had collected about 57 000 samples for testing, representing about 88% of the target for the whole year. Testing of these samples was completed. A total of 201 samples were found to be unsatisfactory. The overall satisfactory rate was 99.6%.

13. As far as unsatisfactory samples were concerned, most of the exceedances or breaches were not serious and would not pose serious health effect to the general public. Major problems of the unsatisfactory samples are as follows:

Sulphur Dioxide (a Preservative) in Meat

14. In 2009, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) stepped up control over the use of sulphur dioxide in meat. The FEHD collected more than 1 000 meat samples, including beef, pork and mutton, from fresh provision shops and market meat stalls for testing. Of these samples, 61 were found to contain sulphur dioxide. Warning letters were immediately issued to the traders concerned and follow-up samples were taken to monitor their improvements. Prosecutions were taken against the traders when there was sufficient evidence. As of November 2009, 53 cases had been successfully prosecuted.

Hygienic Quality of Ice-cream and Frozen Confections

15. Given that ice-cream is a milk-based product which is a good medium for microbial growth, the microbiological quality of ice-cream has always been a concern of the CFS. The CFS conducted a targeted food surveillance project where about 1 000 samples of ice-cream and frozen confections were collected from food factories, ice-cream vans, convenience stores, supermarkets and restaurants for microbiological tests. All samples were found satisfactory for the test of pathogens, yet of which 11 samples were found with the hygiene indicators (total bacterial count and coliform organisms)

exceeding the respective legal standards. It is believed to have been caused by sub-optimal hygienic conditions in the course of processing at the food premises concerned. Although consumption of ice-cream with such exceedances might not lead to the development of clinical illness, the FEHD had taken immediate follow-up actions, such as conducting inspections on the hygienic conditions of food premises, requiring the traders to strictly observe good hygienic practices, issuing warning letters and collecting follow-up samples to monitor their improvements. All nine follow-up samples were found satisfactory upon further testing.

Hygiene Indicators for Imported Frozen Confections

16. Samples of imported frozen confections are taken for testing at the import level. In particular, frozen confections imported into Hong Kong for the first time are detained for inspection before entering the market for sale. In 2009, the CFS found that the hygiene indicators (total bacterial count and coliform organisms) of 20 samples from four consignments of imported frozen confections exceeded legal standards. All these consignments were either sealed and disposed of or returned to the countries of origin, without entering the retail market. Warning letters were immediately issued to the relevant importers and the authorities of the exporting countries were also notified for follow-up. The products in question have been banned from import into Hong Kong temporarily until the CFS receives satisfactory investigation results.

Metallic Contaminants in Seafood

17. In conducting routine food surveillance in 2009, the CFS from time to time found that seafood samples contained levels of metallic contaminants exceeding the legal limits. For instance, mercury was detected in large predatory fish (such as swordfish, tuna), and cadmium was found in bivalve shellfish (such as oyster, scallop) and crustaceans (such as scampi, crab meat). The possibility cannot be ruled out that long term exposure to metallic contaminants exceeding safety levels may cause damage to organs, particularly among vulnerable groups such as foetuses and young children.

18. As metallic contaminants in food come from a wide range of sources, it is more effective to control contamination at source. The CFS will trace the sources of the unsatisfactory samples and notify the authorities of the places of origin for follow-up. The CFS will also issue warning letters to the

traders concerned requiring them to stop selling and dispose of the food in question, and advise the public to maintain a balanced diet and eat a variety of seafood so as to reduce food risks.

Conclusion

19. The Food Surveillance Programme of 2009 reveals that the overall satisfactory rate of food products in Hong Kong was maintained at a high level, which was comparable to the results of recent years. For individual problem food items identified, the CFS has taken prompt and effective risk management actions to safeguard public health. The CFS has also released food surveillance results and given relevant advice to the public and the trade in a timely manner, and promoted the tripartite collaboration among the Government, the food trade and members of the public in ensuring food safety in Hong Kong.

Advice Sought

20. Members are invited to note and comment on the work of the CFS in respect of the Food Surveillance Programme of 2009.

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