For Discussion
On 10 April 2012

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Report on the Food Surveillance Programme for 2011

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the Food Surveillance Programme of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) in 2011 and reports on the major surveillance results for the period and the follow-up actions taken.

Food Surveillance Programme

2. CFS adopts the World Health Organization's "from farm to table" strategy to ensure food safety in Hong Kong. Control at source includes allowing only food from approved farms/ processing plants to Hong Kong, and requiring health certificates for certain food animals and food products, etc. At the downstream of the food supply chain, food surveillance programme is a key component to ensure food safety.

3. CFS' Food Surveillance Programme monitors food on sale to ensure its compliance with legal requirements and fitness for human consumption. CFS takes food samples at import, wholesale and retail levels and adopts a risk-based approach in determining the types of samples to be collected, the frequency and number of samples for testing, and the types of laboratory analyses to be conducted. The sampling programme is under regular review, taking into account factors such as past food surveillance results, local and overseas food incidents as well as relevant risk analyses. CFS will consult the Expert Committee on Food Safety (Expert Committee) on food surveillance projects under the Programme, which will be implemented only after they have been endorsed by the Expert Committee.

4. The three-pronged food surveillance strategy consists of routine food surveillance, targeted food surveillance and seasonal food surveillance. In addition, CFS also conducts surveys on popular food items to assess the safety of food that is commonly consumed in Hong Kong. CFS completed 12 targeted food surveillance projects, five seasonal food surveillance projects and three surveys on popular food items in 2011. Details of these projects are set out in the **Annex**.

Announcement Mechanism

5. CFS releases food surveillance results in a timely manner. If test results indicate that a food sample poses threats to or has immediate impact on public health, CFS will issue press releases immediately to explain the risks involved and advise the public against consuming the food concerned.

6. The results of targeted food surveillance projects and surveys on popular food items are released upon completion, while the results of seasonal food surveillance projects are announced ahead of the relevant festival and season to enable consumers to make informed choices. CFS also releases monthly Food Safety Report that summarises all surveillance results of the previous month.

7. Apart from press releases, CFS also uploads the food surveillance results on its website. Advice will be given to consumers on measures to minimise health risks posed by problem food.

Overall Results

8. In response to the Fukushima nuclear power plant incident caused by the earthquake in Japan in March 2011, CFS has been conducting targeted radiation testing on food imported from Japan since 12 March 2011. Three vegetable samples were found to contain iodine-131 exceeding the relevant guideline levels laid down by the Codex Alimentarius Commission on 23 March 2011. The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (DFEH) thus issued an order under section 78B of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap.132) on the same day to prohibit import of certain fresh

produce, milk, milk beverages and milk powder from five affected prefectures (Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Gunma) of Japan. The order is still effective. All batches of vegetables related to the unsatisfactory samples were disposed of and had not entered the market.

9. As at the end of December 2011, more than 61 900 samples of imported food from Japan had been tested. Besides the aforementioned three unsatisfactory samples, test results of all other samples had been satisfactory. All surveillance results are uploaded onto CFS' website every working day. Of these, six samples (including two vegetables, three tea leaves and one tea powder) were detected with low radioactivity levels not exceeding the guideline levels of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Although the results were considered satisfactory, the importers had voluntarily surrendered the related food consignments for disposal and such products had not entered the market.

10. Apart from radiation testing of samples of imported food from Japan mentioned above, CFS conducted tests on a total of about 64 900 samples in 2011, i.e. about nine samples per 1 000 persons of the population of Hong Kong. This is a relatively high testing rate when compared with other overseas economies.

11. There were 174 unsatisfactory samples among these test results (see Table 1). The overall satisfaction rate was 99.7%, and even 100% for certain testing parameters and food items. For instance, the results of dioxins and melamine testing and surveillance of some seasonal food (including mooncakes, rice dumplings and Poon Choi) were all satisfactory.

Table 1: Major problems of unsatisfactory samples in the 2011 Food Surveillance Programme

Food group	**Number of unsatisfactory samples**	**Major problems (number of unsatisfactory samples involved)**
Vegetables, fruits and related products	20	Metallic contamination(11), preservatives(4), pathogens(3), pesticides(2)
Meat, poultry and related products	25	Sulphur dioxide in fresh meat(14), veterinary drug residues(7), preservatives(3), pathogens(1)
Aquatic products and	19	Metallic contamination(6), veterinary drug

related products		residues(6), preservatives(4), toxins(2), colouring matters(1)
Milk, milk products and frozen confections	39	Hygienic indicators(37), preservatives(1), pathogens(1)
Cereal, grains and related products	3	Metallic contamination(3)
Others	68	Plasticisers(49), pathogens(9), preservatives(7), toxins(2), colouring matters(1)

12. Moreover, CFS had strengthened surveillance in response to public concern on food incidents and reports, such as reports on the use of "one drop of incense" (一滴香), "swill oil" (地溝油), "crab washing powder" (洗蟹粉), "blended vinegar adulterated with industrial grade acetic acid" (勾兌醋) and "plant growth regulators" (膨大劑) in the Mainland; the suspected contamination of registered farms supplying vegetables to Hong Kong as a result of illegal dumping of chromium waste in Yunnan; as well as the incidents of possible contamination of vegetables in Germany and cantaloupes in United States with haemorrhagic *Escherichia coli* and *Listeria monocytogenes* respectively. CFS had taken immediate risk management measures, including liaising with the relevant authorities for more details and further information, issuing rapid trade alerts, conducting sales check to determine whether the affected products were sold in Hong Kong and taking relevant food samples from the local market for testing. All results were satisfactory.

13. Most of the unsatisfactory samples were not serious cases and would not cause adverse health effects to the general public. Of greater concern are the following incidents and results:

<u>I. The incident of food contamination with plasticisers in Taiwan</u>

14. Since the incident of food contamination with plasticisers in Taiwan in end May 2011, CFS has strengthened the monitoring and testing of relevant groups of food and drink products according to the information given by the Taiwanese authority. As at the end of August 2011, 49 unsatisfactory samples had been found.

15. CFS had made immediate announcements of the unsatisfactory results and requested the traders concerned to stop selling and to dispose of the affected food products. In addition, DFEH issued a total of six

orders under section 78B of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap.132) to prohibit plasticiser-contaminated food products that might pose health risk from being imported into and supplied within Hong Kong and to direct the recall of such products.

16. From 3 October 2011 onwards, CFS subsumed the testing of plasticisers in food, conducted previously under a targeted approach, under its routine food surveillance programme so as to continue to safeguard food safety. As at the end of December 2011, CFS had collected about 1 100 samples for plasticisers testing. There were no more unsatisfactory results apart from the aforesaid 49 samples.

II. Excessive cadmium (a metallic contaminant) in vegetables and cereal products

17. Last year, CFS detected 14 samples of vegetables (e.g. spinach, ceylon spinach) and cereal products (e.g. rice noodles, rolled oats) with cadmium levels exceeding the legal limits during its routine food surveillance. Long-term exposure to metallic contaminants that exceed safety levels may cause damage to organs, particularly among vulnerable groups such as fetuses and young children. For those unsatisfactory samples with identified source, CFS had notified the authorities of the exporting countries for follow-up and requested the vendors concerned to stop selling and to dispose of the affected vegetables.

III. Sulphur dioxide (a preservative) in meat

18. In 2011, CFS continued to strengthen control over the use of sulphur dioxide in meat and collected more than 850 beef, pork and mutton samples from fresh provision shops and market meat stalls for testing. Among them, 14 fresh meat samples were found to contain sulphur dioxide. Warning letters were immediately issued to the traders concerned and follow-up samples were taken to monitor improvements. Prosecutions have been taken against three cases with sufficient evidence. One case was convicted and fined while ruling for the other two cases is pending.

IV. Veterinary drug residues in meat and aquatic products

19. A total of seven samples of meat and six samples of aquatic products were found containing non-permitted or excessive veterinary drug residues. Of these, three fish samples were found to contain malachite green, while the remaining 10 samples (e.g. frozen suckling pig,

hairy crab and dried shrimp) were found containing antibiotic residues such as nitrofurans and chloramphenicol. CFS had taken enforcement actions to dispose of the problem food. The traders concerned were reminded to procure food ingredients from reliable sources and to ensure that the food complies with local regulations. In addition, CFS has been taking food samples for testing of beta-adrenergic agonist (leanness-enhancing agent) under the Food Surveillance Programme. Last year, over 900 meat and meat product samples from various countries had been tested and all results were satisfactory. CFS will continue to strengthen the surveillance of veterinary drug residues in meat and aquatic products and take samples for analysis.

V. Hygiene indicators for imported milk products and frozen confections

20. CFS has been taking samples of milk products and frozen confections at import level for testing. In particular, milk products and frozen confections imported into Hong Kong for the first time have to be detained for testing and will only be allowed into the market for sale after passing the tests. During such operations in 2011, CFS found six consignments of imported milk products and frozen confections with hygiene indicators (total bacterial count, coliform organisms or colony count) exceeding the legal standards of Hong Kong. All these consignments were either sealed and disposed of or returned to the countries of origin without entering the local market. CFS had notified the authorities of the exporting countries for follow-up. The products in question were suspended from import into Hong Kong until CFS was satisfied with the reports of the importers or manufacturers on remedial actions.

Conclusions

21. The Food Surveillance Programme implemented by CFS in 2011 reveals that the overall satisfaction rate of the food sold in Hong Kong remains at a high level, which is comparable to that of recent years. For individual food products with problems identified, CFS had taken prompt and effective risk management actions to safeguard public health.

22. In addition, the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612) has come into full operation since February 2012. According to the Food Safety Ordinance (the Ordinance), any person who carries on a food importation or distribution business without registration, or fails to comply with the

record-keeping requirements commits an offence. We believe that the Ordinance will enhance the ability of CFS in tracing the source of food and take necessary risk control measures effectively when problem food is identified or when food incidents occur.

Advice Sought

23. Members are invited to note and comment on the Food Surveillance Programme implemented by CFS in 2011.

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Annex

Projects under the 2011 Food Surveillance Programme

(A) Routine Food Surveillance

It covered major food groups such as fruits and vegetables, meat, poultry, aquatic products, milk and cereals. CFS adopted a risk-based approach in taking samples for chemical and microbiological analyses.

(B) Targeted Food Surveillance

(i) Sulphur dioxide in meat (2 phases)
(ii) Microbiological quality of lunch boxes
(iii) Microbiological quality of refrigerated pre-packaged boxed meal
(iv) *Enterobacter Sakazakii* in powdered infant formula
(v) Microbiological quality of ice-cream and frozen confections
(vi) Formaldehyde in noodlefish
(vii) Microbiological quality of Chinese cold dishes
(viii) Microbiological quality of bottled water
(ix) Sudan dyes in eggs and egg products
(x) Nitrate and nitrite in meat, meat products and cheese
(xi) Preservatives in preserved fruits and vegetables

(C) Seasonal Food Surveillance

(i) Lunar New Year food
(ii) Rice dumplings
(iii) Mooncakes
(iv) Hairy crabs
(v) Microbiological quality of Poon Choi

(D) Survey on Popular Food Items

(i) Hotpot soup bases
(ii) Vegetarian food
(iii) Hong Kong style tea restaurant