

**For discussion
on 8 November 2016**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Report on the Incident of Pigs Tainted
with Prohibited Veterinary Drug**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on an incident of live pigs tainted with prohibited veterinary drug in early August 2016, and the measures taken by the Government to improve the food safety control at slaughterhouses.

Background

2. Around 1.6 million heads of live pigs are consumed each year in Hong Kong, accounting for about 30% of our pork consumption. About 95% of live pigs are imported from Mainland registered farms, and the remaining 5% are supplied by local pig farms. All live pigs are slaughtered at the three licensed slaughterhouses in Hong Kong, namely Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (“SSSH”), Tsuen Wan Slaughterhouse (“TWSH”) and Cheung Chau Slaughterhouse (“CCSH”).

3. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (“FEHD”) is responsible for ensuring that the livestock supplied to the market is compliant with Hong Kong’s statutory requirements and fit for human consumption. The level of agricultural chemical and veterinary drug residues in food animals including pigs is governed by the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Chemical Residues) Regulation (Cap.139N) (“the Regulation”), which sets out the agricultural chemicals and veterinary drugs prohibited and regulated in Hong Kong.

4. In early August 2016, preliminary testing of certain urine samples from 319 live pigs imported from two Mainland farms were suspected to contain residues of a prohibited veterinary drug - beta-agonist. Excessive consumption of meat and offal containing beta-agonist may cause rapid heart rates, dizziness, headaches, tremors and nervousness.

5. Owing to the failure on the part of its staff at SSSH in strictly observing the established procedures and guidelines on that day and inadequate communication between staff, FEHD could not prevent part of the pigs among the two batches in question from being slaughtered at SSSH and discharged to the market (“the incident”). In order to prevent the suspected tainted pork and offal from reaching consumers and to safeguard public health, FEHD took immediate remedial actions by urging the public to stop consuming the suspected tainted pork and offal bought from a list of retail outlets provided by the operator of SSSH. FEHD also traced the distribution of the pig carcasses and offal and liaised with the retail outlets concerned. About 3 500 kg of suspected tainted pork and pig offal were marked and sealed by FEHD at the retail outlets, or voluntarily surrendered by those retailers. The pork and offal, together with the remaining live pigs and carcasses from the same batches that were intercepted at SSSH / TWSH and not yet discharged to the market, were ultimately disposed of after the Government Laboratory confirmed that the two batches of pigs in question were tainted with Salbutamol, which is one of two types of beta-agonist prohibited under the Regulation.

6. A comprehensive investigation into the incident was then conducted. The Government announced the results of investigation on 19 August 2016 and has acknowledged our responsibility for the incident. The Government apologised to members of the public and the relevant stakeholders for the incident. FEHD has also issued a letter of apology to each of the retailers affected in the incident, and granted a one-off ex-gratia payment to the retailers concerned for the pork and offal disposed of, based on the retail price of pork announced by the Census and Statistics Department.

7. In addition, to uphold food safety control on food animals and prevent recurrence of similar incidents in the future, the Government has taken the opportunity to review the procedures of the slaughterhouses to identify room for improvements. Details of the Government’s current surveillance measures at slaughterhouses and improvements made subsequent to the incident are outlined below.

Surveillance at Slaughterhouses

8. To protect public health and ensure food safety, the use of veterinary drugs in food animals is closely monitored. For imported live pigs which are all supplied from the Mainland, health certificates have to be issued by the relevant Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureaux attesting that the imports are free of prohibited chemicals and do not carry residues of controlled chemicals exceeding Hong Kong's statutory limits. For locally reared pigs, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") regularly inspects local pig farms to monitor the health of the pigs and advise farmers on the proper usage of veterinary drugs.

9. In addition, over the years the Government has established a comprehensive system to ascertain if agricultural chemical and veterinary drug residues prohibited or restricted under the Regulation are found in the food animals for slaughtering. Urine samples are collected by FEHD from each and every consignment of live pigs entering the slaughterhouses¹ for screening tests for beta-agonist. Screening tests of the samples collected by FEHD at both SSSH and TWSH are conducted by AFCD's veterinary laboratory located in SSSH. Due to the trade's operation where pigs arrive at slaughterhouses at different times of a day, samples collected by FEHD are tested in three periods on each day, and test results of the urine samples are released by AFCD's veterinary laboratory in stages as and when available.

10. Pigs with their samples tested negative will be despatched for slaughtering at the production line. Post-mortem inspections of the slaughtered pigs will be conducted at the slaughterhouses to ensure the carcasses and offal are fit for human consumption before they are released to the market.

11. In the event that sample(s) from a consignment are tested positive for beta-agonist, additional samples will be collected by FEHD for conducting a second screening test by AFCD's veterinary laboratory. In parallel, the consignment in question will be detained in isolation lairages. The Government Laboratory will conduct confirmation test on samples tested positive at the second screening test in order to ascertain if the whole consignment in question should be disposed of.

¹ Due to the small turnover, pigs handled by CCSH are sampled at TWSH and tested by AFCD's veterinary laboratory before they are shipped to CCSH for slaughtering.

Improvements to the Operation of the Slaughterhouses

12. Notwithstanding the fact that over the years the surveillance system has been able to serve the purpose of screening out pigs that do not meet the statutory requirements on beta-agonist usage, the incident has revealed that there is room for further improvement to ensure that FEHD could effectively perform its gatekeeping role. FEHD has explored with stakeholders, including AFCD, the slaughterhouse operators, live pig importers and pig buying agents, on possible improvements to the operation of the slaughterhouses, with a view to ensuring that all stakeholders will be fully engaged to prevent recurrence of similar incidents in the future. Measures that have been, or would be, introduced include the following:

- (a) FEHD has reminded all the staff at the slaughterhouses that the overarching principle is to ensure food safety and thus no pig can be slaughtered and released to the market unless the concerned consignment has passed the beta-agonist screening tests conducted by AFCD's veterinary laboratory;
- (b) in the event that a consignment fails a screening test, it would be of paramount importance to allow sufficient buffer time to take remedial actions including conducting further screening tests and transferring the pigs concerned to isolation lairages. To this end, AFCD's veterinary laboratory has made efforts to advance the completion of the first screening test and notification of the negative results to the said stakeholders. Broadly speaking, since early October 2016, notification of the results for over 80% of the daily turnover will be made at least 6 hours before the slaughter production line commences operation, while less than 20% of the daily turnover will be made at least 2.5 hours before the slaughter production line commences;
- (c) when a consignment fails the first screening test, AFCD's veterinary laboratory will conduct a second screening test. FEHD will immediately notify all parties concerned, including slaughterhouse operators, importers and buying agents, to facilitate timely relocation of the pigs in question to the isolation lairages for detention purpose. FEHD aims at completing the detention at least 30 minutes before the production line commences operation. Unless it can be confirmed that all implicated pigs are successfully relocated to the isolation lairages, the production line cannot commence operation on any pigs;

- (d) FEHD's senior management will be notified immediately if the targets under either (b) or (c) above could not be met;
- (e) FEHD is revising the operational manuals for the slaughterhouses to include in detail the follow-up actions by FEHD staff and other stakeholders in different scenarios which would include a communication protocol among all parties concerned. In addition, an emergency contact list will be compiled and regularly updated; and
- (f) to ensure that the integrity of the food safety control regime at the slaughterhouses would not be compromised by inevitable staff movements from time to time, newly deployed staff will be closely supervised on daily operations in order to ensure they could comply strictly with the operation protocol. To better prepare FEHD's frontline staff and the other parties concerned to tackle emergency situation and handle similar incidents in the future, FEHD will work with stakeholders to conduct drills on emergency situations on an annual basis.

13. In addition to the improved measures introduced, FEHD has established a working group, chaired by a directorate officer of FEHD, with relevant stakeholders, including importers, slaughterhouse operators, buyers and retailers, with a view to establishing a reliable record keeping system to ensure the accuracy of information of the distributors and retail outlets involved in the transaction and facilitating the tracing of pigs released to the market, just in case.

Conclusion

14. Members are invited to note the report on the incident and improvements to the operation of the slaughterhouses.

**Food and Health Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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