

**For discussion
on 19 December 2016**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Latest Development of the Incidents of
Hairy Crabs Detected with Dioxins and Import Control on Fresh Food**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the import control on fresh food and the incidents of hairy crabs detected with dioxins.

Import Control on Fresh Food

2. Hong Kong is an open economy with very limited crop yields and livestock production. The supply of food, therefore, mainly relies on import, such as fresh food from the Mainland. Import requirements for food are imposed for public health concerns. Certain imported food like meat, poultry, game and eggs are governed by subsidiary legislation of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance, Cap. 132. In accordance with the Imported Game, Meat, Poultry and Eggs Regulations, Cap.132AK, import of game or eggs requires the prior permission of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). Import of meat, poultry or eggs is confined to sources recognised by FEHD. Importers are required to provide health certificates issued by the issuing authorities of exporting countries/places. The import of live food poultry is governed by the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations, Cap. 139A, which require that the birds be brought into Hong Kong through the designated point of entry (Man Kam To Control Point), accompanied by a valid health certificate issued by a competent veterinary authority in the exporting place, and taken forthwith by the most direct route to the designated place (Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market). Under Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Chemical Residues) Regulation, Cap. 139N, any food animal should be accompanied by a valid certificate issued by a competent veterinary authority of the exporting place certifying that the food animal does not contain any prohibited chemical, that the concentration of any agricultural and veterinary chemical in the tissues of the food animal does not exceed the maximum residue limit, and that it is labelled, marked or otherwise identified.

3. In view of the large proportion of foods from the Mainland in the local market, administrative arrangements between Hong Kong and the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine to the People's Republic of China (AQSIQ) have been put in place. Under these arrangements, all live aquatic food animals (including hairy crabs) and vegetables should come from registered farms and processing plants with the necessary documents issued by the relevant mainland authorities. For example, each consignment of live aquatic animals is covered by a valid health certificate issued by the quarantine and inspection authorities concerned. While health certificates and other control at source measures are important, the importance of surveillance and enforcement within Hong Kong's borders cannot be over-emphasised. Hence, measures at strategic points of the supply chain within Hong Kong's jurisdiction have been put in place to safeguard food safety, with sampling of food for testing at the import, wholesale and retail levels being an essential and key component. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) will maintain this important and necessary duty.

4. As regards inspection and quarantine, imported live poultry are subject to avian influenza (AI) virus testing at Man Kam To Livestock Inspection Station. After testing, the birds will be delivered to the Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market for checking. They will not be released until the laboratory report shows that they are free from AI infection. Live food animals are also subject to inspection and testing at Man Kam To and slaughterhouses, so as to ensure that the meat of these animals is safe for human consumption before being supplied to retail outlets in Hong Kong for sale. At present, all vegetables imported from the Mainland must be accompanied by identification tags and the export certificates for vegetables which are supplied to Hong Kong and Macau. Samples of vegetables are taken from lorries for testing of pesticide residues at Man Kam To Food Control Office.

5. According to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance, all food available for sale in Hong Kong should be fit for human consumption. Controls in specific aspects are provided in subsidiary legislation under the Ordinance. The Food Surveillance Programme (FSP) is a key component of the CFS's work in ensuring food safety. The CFS monitors food through the risk-based FSP to ensure that foods meet the legal requirements and are fit for human consumption. Under the FSP, the CFS officers take samples at import, wholesale and retail levels for microbiological testing, chemical analysis and radiological testing. The sampling programme is under regular review by the CFS, taking into account factors such as past food surveillance results, local and overseas food incidents, and relevant food risk analyses. Complementing day-to-day surveillance of food items, the CFS also conducts surveillance of food items on a project basis. Examples include the testing of radioactive levels in foods from Japan in the wake of the nuclear power plant incident in

Fukushima, Japan in 2011, and the seasonal food surveillance programme. In respect of the latter, we sample for testing, for example, moon cakes in the run-up to the Mid-Autumn Festival and hairy crabs when autumn approaches.

Incidents of Hairy Crabs Detected with Dioxins

6. In this year (as at 1 December), the CFS has conducted tests on 18 hairy crab samples for dioxins and dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Three of them were found exceeding the CFS's action level while the rest passed the tests. Details are mentioned below.

7. As mentioned in our briefing to the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on the incidents and related follow-up on 8 November, the CFS collected a total of five hairy crab samples (a total weight of about 12 kilograms) for tests on dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs in late September this year under the seasonal food surveillance programme. Two of the samples were found to contain dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs at a total level exceeding the action level adopted by the CFS (i.e. dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs levels should not exceed 6.5 picograms (pg) toxic equivalent per gram of the food sample (wet weight)).

8. According to the relevant health certificates for the imported hairy crabs, the unsatisfactory hairy crab samples were imported from two aquaculture farms (“吳江萬頃太湖蟹養殖有限公司” and “江蘇太湖水產有限公司”) in Jiangsu Province. To safeguard public health, the CFS suspended the import of the hairy crabs from the two aquaculture farms concerned with immediate effect from 1 November 2016. It also informed the local importers concerned of the irregularity and instructed them to remove the hairy crabs from shelves, stop sale and initiate a recall. The importers recalled a total of about 1 200 kilograms of hairy crabs supplied by the two aquaculture farms.

9. Following the detection of dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs exceeding the action level in the aforementioned two hairy crab samples, the CFS immediately stepped up surveillance on hairy crabs. Test results showed that twelve samples were satisfactory, but the total level of dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs in one sample taken at the retail level on 3 November exceeded the action level. The CFS, when taking the sample, was told by the retailer that the sample originated from a certain Mainland aquaculture farm. However, the CFS found that when comparing the sample in question against the two samples taken from the two aquaculture farms in Taihu where the import of hairy crabs to Hong Kong was suspended earlier, the proportions of the individual dioxins level of the former were highly similar to one of the Taihu samples. The CFS also made comparison between the unsatisfactory sample

in question and the other two satisfactory samples originated from the aquaculture farm claimed by the retailer. The results indicated that the proportions of the individual dioxins level of the unsatisfactory sample were highly unmatched with those of the two satisfactory samples. The CFS has reasonable doubts that the unsatisfactory sample taken at the retail level on 3 November did not originate from the aquaculture farm claimed by the retailer.

10. In tracing the source of hairy crabs in this incident, apart from using and following up on the information of Mainland registered aquatic farms and health certificates, the CFS assessed the proportions of the individual dioxins level of hairy crab samples. The CFS did not merely rely on the information provided by the retailers to the CFS.

11. In short, the recall and regulatory actions have achieved the expected results, striking a balance between protecting public health and minimising adverse effect on the trade.

12. When a recall of food products is necessary, the traders have the responsibility to provide the CFS with correct information on the origins of food. Regarding this individual incident, the CFS has immediately launched an investigation including following up the matter with the retailer and took appropriate actions (including prosecution).

13. The CFS will continue to follow up and take appropriate actions, including conduct enhanced surveillance program for testing on the relevant products for dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs at the import level, so as to ensure food safety and protect public health.

14. Regarding risk communication, we are mindful of the public concern about the risks of dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs from food consumption. Dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs are a group of chemically-related compounds that are persistent environmental pollutants. They are ubiquitous in the environment resulting from natural processes (such as volcanic eruptions and forest fires) or as by-products of industrial processes. In general, some foods may contain dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs, but the concentrations will not cause acute adverse effects. As regards chronic health effects, the Joint Food and Agriculture Organization / World Health Organization Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) have established a Provisional Tolerable Monthly Intake (PTMI) of 70 pg WHO-TEQ/ kg bw per month for dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs. Occasional short-term exposure above the PTMI would have no health consequences provided that the average intake over long period is not exceeded.

15. CFS has all along provided risk alert to the public on dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs. In the announcement of excessive dioxins detected in hairy

crab samples, CFS has further issued risk alert to the public and advised them on ways to reduce the risk of dietary exposure to dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs. For details, please refer to “Hairy crabs with dioxins and dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls exceeding CFS’ action levels - Frequently Asked Questions”

(www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme_rafs/files/QA_on_dioxin_in_hairy_crabs_e.pdf).

Advice Sought

16. Members are invited to note this paper.

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