

[English Translation]

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Clerk to Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
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Dear Miss So,

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Supplementary Information on Incident concerning
Quality of Frozen and Chilled Meat and Poultry Meat from Brazil**

At the meeting of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene held on 8 April 2017, Members requested the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) to provide further information in respect of the follow-up actions on the incident concerning the quality of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil. The relevant supplementary information is set out below:

(a) Meat and poultry meat samples taken in the past 3 years

CFS has all along adopted a risk-based approach under its routine food surveillance programme in sampling foods (including meat and poultry meat) at import, wholesale and retail levels for testing to ensure that they are fit for human consumption and in compliance with the legal requirements in Hong Kong. From 2014 to 2016, a total of

17 060 samples of pork, beef, poultry meat and their products were taken for chemical and microbiological testing. The testing parameters included veterinary drug residues, metallic contaminants, preservatives, colouring matters, pathogens and hygiene indicators.

Except for 29 fresh meat samples found to contain preservatives, 6 meat and poultry products detected with excessive pathogens and 1 meat product with an undeclared sweetener, the test results of all other samples were satisfactory. CFS has taken follow-up actions regarding the 36 unsatisfactory samples, including announcing the test results to the public promptly, tracing the sources and distribution of the foods concerned and collecting follow-up samples for testing. None of the unsatisfactory samples was related to frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil.

(b)-(d) Frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat imported from Brazil

The market share of the products from the 21 Brazilian meat processing plants involved in the incident was not high in Hong Kong. Among the import licences¹ issued during the six-week period immediately preceding the date of the import ban of 21 March 2017 (i.e. from 6 February to 21 March 2017), 92 000 kilograms (kg) of products were related to 6 of the plants under investigation. The products accounted for less than 1% of all Brazilian meat products covered by the import licences issued by CFS over the same period of time.

In response to Members' request, CFS further confirmed that during the one-year period prior to the import ban (i.e. from 22 March 2016 to 21 March 2017), the products covered by the import licences issued to the 21 Brazilian plants under investigation accounted for less than 1% of all Brazilian meat products covered by all the import licences issued by CFS over the same period of time. The relevant import licences involved products for both supplying Hong Kong and transshipment. CFS does not have statistics on the actual quantity of products imported from the plants concerned for the purpose of supplying Hong Kong during the said period.

Presently, Brazilian meat and poultry meat is imported into Hong Kong under health certificates issued by an issuing entity of Brazil and provided by the importers. Thousands of processing plants are

¹ An import license issued by FEHD is valid for 6 weeks, starting from the issue date.

eligible for exporting from Brazil. In this connection, the Brazilian authorities indicated that apart from the 21 plants under investigation, there was no evidence that other plants authorised to export meat products to the international market were involved in any irregularities. Those other plants remained authorised by other countries or regions, such as the Mainland, the European Union, Singapore, etc., to export their relevant products from Brazil. Regarding the 21 plants under investigation, the full list of their names and factory codes allocated by the Brazilian authorities was published in CFS' press release on 24 March 2017.

(e) Enhanced sampling of meat and poultry meat from Brazil

Upon learning of the incident concerning Brazilian meat and poultry meat, CFS immediately enhanced sampling of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil at import and retail levels for testing of meat deterioration and other food safety indicators. As at end July 2017, about 500 samples of Brazilian meat and poultry meat were tested for various food safety indicators, including metallic contaminants, veterinary drug residues, pesticide residues, volatile basic nitrogen, sorbic acid, nitrate, nitrite and foreign matters. The test results of all samples were satisfactory.

(f)-(g) Recall and inspection

After ordering a recall of all frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat imported from the 21 plants in the evening of 24 March 2017, CFS immediately liaised with a total of 17 local importers to follow up on the recall and conducted inspections of over 500 retail stores. Over 89 000 kg of products in total were recalled, which included 4 000 kg from the retail level.

All the importers, distributors and retailers involved in this incident fully cooperated with CFS in the recall. Following the Brazilian authorities' confirmation that the health certificates of the frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat exported to Hong Kong earlier did not involve any irregularities, and in light of the satisfactory results of surveillance and sampling, CFS released all the recalled products on 11 May 2017. There was not the need to disclose the list of traders involved.

(h) Collection of information and surveillance

CFS has been actively monitoring local and overseas food incidents by collecting information on food imports and food incidents through various channels and sources, including the Census and Statistics Department, the Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), the registration scheme for food importers and distributors under the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612) (FSO), import licences issued by CFS, the food labelling requirements², as well as international networks and intelligence. For example, information is obtained from international food safety agencies (such as the International Food Safety Authorities Network of the World Health Organization and the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed of the European Commission) and overseas food regulatory bodies, and through notifications from food regulatory authorities of countries/regions exporting food to Hong Kong and media websites. Upon identifying food incidents that may affect public health in Hong Kong, CFS will conduct risk assessments, taking into account factors including potential risks to consumers, local regulations and local availability of the food product concerned. Appropriate control measures will be initiated to protect public health.

² Under the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations (Cap. 132W) (“the Regulations”), general prepackaged food (including frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat) shall be labelled with its name or designation, list of ingredients, durability indication, statement of special conditions for storage or instructions for use, name and address of manufacturer or packer and weight or volume.

Under the Regulations, the name and detailed address of the manufacturer or packer shall be provided on the label of prepackaged food. Otherwise, the prepackaged food shall be labelled with an indication of its country of origin, together with:

- (a) the name, as well as address of the registered or principal office, of the distributor or brand owner in Hong Kong, with the full address of the manufacturer or packer of the prepackaged food in its country of origin provided in writing to FEHD in advance; or
- (b) a code marking identifying the manufacturer or packer in its country of origin, with particulars of the code marking and of the manufacturer or packer to whom it relates provided in writing to FEHD in advance.

Any person who fails to comply with the Regulations would be liable to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and six months’ imprisonment. The information on the manufacturer, packer or country of origin on the food label enables CFS to trace the source(s) of a prepackaged food.

The food tracing mechanism provided under the FSO enables CFS to identify food sources more effectively and take prompt action when dealing with food incidents in order to safeguard public health. The mechanism consists mainly of the following components:

- (a) a registration scheme for food importers and food distributors; and
- (b) a requirement for food traders to maintain proper transaction records to enhance food traceability.

CFS has drawn up a “Guide to the Registration Scheme for Food Importers and Food Distributors” (the Guide) to facilitate the trade’s understanding of the scheme. The Guide covers the procedures of registration and renewal and various application forms. Answers to some frequently asked questions are also provided. The Guide has been posted on the dedicated webpage on the FSO (www.foodsafetyord.gov.hk) for reference by the trade.

Moreover, CFS conducts inspections on food importers, distributors and retailers every year to ensure their compliance with the registration scheme and the requirement of keeping transaction records under the FSO. CFS adopts a risk-based enforcement approach in planning and conducting inspections of food premises. The trade is reminded to adhere to the FSO in managing their transaction records systematically so that the information can be submitted within the timeframe specified by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) as and when necessary. CFS has also reminded the trade that, depending on the urgency of the matter, DFEH may require food traders to submit their records and information within a minimum of 24 hours.

CFS has liaised with the trade on enhancing the communication mechanism by requiring food importers and distributors to provide information of at least one contact person, as well as a 24-hour contact telephone number and a mobile telephone number for getting in touch with the contact person(s) during office and non-office hours in case of food emergencies. This facilitates CFS to make immediate contact with the relevant traders when necessary to obtain the required information, so as to safeguard food safety.

(i) Prosecution figures

Over the past 5 years (i.e. from 2012 to 2016), CFS had instituted 522 prosecutions against breaches of sections 52 and 54 of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132). Fines were imposed on all convicted cases. CFS does not have information on prosecutions taken under the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (Cap. 362), which C&ED is the principal enforcement agency.

CFS will continue monitoring the development of the incident closely, and maintain close liaison with the Brazilian authorities and communication with the trade. CFS will also suitably adjust its follow-up actions having regard to the latest development in order to ensure food safety in Hong Kong.

Yours sincerely,

(Chelsea Wong)
for Secretary for Food and Health

c.c. Controller, CFS