

**For information
on 9 October 2017**

Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Food Safety Surveillance Mechanism for Imported Food

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the surveillance mechanism of the Centre for Food Safety (“CFS”) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department for imported food, the actions taken by the CFS following the incident concerning the quality of Brazilian frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat (“Brazilian meat incident”) in March 2017, and the recent detection of suspected falsified health certificates from Brazil.

Food Safety Surveillance Mechanism for Imported Food

2. The 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 registered farms / processing plants with audit inspections to enter Hong Kong, and requiring health certificates for certain food animals and food products, etc. At the downstream of the food supply chain, the Food Surveillance Programme (“FSP”) is one of the key components to safeguard food safety.

3. The CFS has all along adopted a risk-based approach under the FSP in sampling food (including meat and poultry meat) at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing to ensure that they are in compliance with the legal requirements in Hong Kong and fit for human consumption. Other than radiation testing on samples of food imported from Japan¹, the CFS conducted tests on about 65 500 food samples in 2016. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.8%.

¹ Some 73 700 samples of food imported from Japan were tested in 2016. All samples were found satisfactory.

4. For meat and poultry meat, a total of 17 060 samples were taken for testing over the past three years. Only 36 samples were found unsatisfactory². CFS had followed up on these unsatisfactory samples, including announced the testing results, traced the source and distribution of the problem food, and obtained follow-up samples for testing.

5. The registration scheme for food importers and distributors and the requirement for food traders to maintain proper transaction records under the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612) (“FSO”)³ provides for a food tracing mechanism. The mechanism enables the CFS to identify food sources more effectively and take prompt action when dealing with food incidents. The CFS conducts inspections on food importers, distributors and retailers every year to check their compliance with the registration scheme and the requirement of keeping transaction records. In 2016, the CFS inspected 576 premises and instituted 14 prosecutions against food importers / distributors who had not registered under the FSO. Among these 14 cases, 13 resulted in conviction with fines ranging from \$500 to \$20,000. The remaining case is pending adjudication by the Court.

Follow-up on Brazilian Meat Incident

6. Brazil is a major source of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat of Hong Kong. According to the existing agreement between Hong Kong and the Brazilian authorities on the import of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil, processing plants authorised by the Brazilian authorities for exporting meat to Hong Kong should produce a health certificate issued by the local authorities for every consignment of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat imported into Hong Kong.

² Among these samples, except for 29 fresh meat samples found to contain preservatives, 6 meat and poultry products detected with excessive pathogens, and 1 meat product detected with an undeclared sweetener, all other samples were found satisfactory.

³ The FSO requires a person who, in the course of business, imports, acquires and supplies by wholesale food in Hong Kong must keep transaction records of the business from which the food was obtained and the business to which it was supplied. It is a criminal offence in violating the relevant requirements.

7. In March 2017, there were product quality issues regarding some meat plants in Brazil and the Brazilian authorities carried out investigation into corruption or misconduct of their food safety control officials. The CFS was highly concerned about the incident, and had taken a series of follow-up actions having regard to development of the situation, including imposing a temporary ban on the import of all frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil starting from the evening of 21 March 2017. After taking into consideration the latest information provided by the Brazilian authorities⁴ and the satisfactory test results of all samples collected during continuous surveillance of meat and poultry meat from Brazil, the CFS announced on 28 March 2017 that the scope of import ban on frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil would be restricted to the 21 plants under investigation. For details, please refer to the information paper we submitted to the Panel on 8 April 2017 (LC Paper No. CB(2)1135/16-17(01)).

8. In view of the Brazilian meat incident, the CFS has stepped up surveillance of Brazilian frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat for testing of meat deterioration and other food safety indicators (e.g. metallic contaminants, veterinary drug residues, pesticide residues, sorbic acid, nitrate and nitrite). From 21 March to 27 September 2017, 584 samples (including chicken feet, pig feet and livestock offal products) collected at the import and retail levels were tested for the above food safety indicators, all with satisfactory results.

9. Following the incident, the CFS started discussion with the Brazilian authorities for further improvement of the import arrangements for frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat, including considering restricting the list and the number of Brazilian plants authorised to export meat to Hong Kong to strengthen the import control of Brazilian products.

⁴ On 28 March 2017, the Brazilian authorities provided further information to the CFS, indicating that they would strictly safeguard the international health certification process and the credibility of the system, and would continue to conduct regular audits of the system to ensure its operational efficacy. Moreover, apart from the 21 plants under investigation, there was no evidence of irregularities involving other meat plants authorised to export products to the international market. Those plants remained authorised by other countries or regions such as the Mainland, the European Union, Singapore, etc. to export meat products from Brazil to their destinations.

Suspected Falsified Health Certificates from Brazil

10. In May 2017, the CFS received a complaint lodged by a food importer about a suspicious health certificate accompanying a consignment of frozen chicken feet imported from Brazil earlier this year. The importer informed the Consulate General of Brazil in Hong Kong and the CFS for follow-up actions. The CFS immediately commenced an investigation and requested the Brazilian authorities to verify the authenticity of the health certificate. On 30 August 2017, the Brazilian authorities confirmed that the health certificate was falsified and the related consignment of frozen chicken feet was pet food. In its follow-up investigation, the CFS found that from October 2016 to 21 September 2017, a total of ten consignments of products (including the consignment involved in the complaint)⁵ which were pet food were exported from Brazil to Hong Kong by the exporter listed on the health certificate concerned. The CFS has asked the Brazilian authorities to confirm the authenticity of the health certificates of the remaining nine consignments and is awaiting a reply.

11. The health certificates of the ten consignments of products were all issued on or before 21 March 2017 (the day the CFS announced the import ban on frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat from Brazil). According to the information provided by the importers concerned, none of the products had entered the local market⁶.

12. For the sake of prudence, the CFS has suspended the import of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat into Hong Kong by the Brazilian exporter and two Brazilian production plants (SIF2421 and SIF2498) with effect from 21 September 2017.

⁵ These included eight consignments of frozen chicken feet, a consignment of cattle offal products and a consignment of pig offal products and pig feet.

⁶ According to the importer concerned, all the products were re-exported to places outside Hong Kong. When the CFS made public the incident on 21 September 2017, the CFS had confirmed and announced that nine of the consignments had not entered the market. As for the consignment of about 27 tonnes of frozen chicken feet, the importer only reported to the CFS at that time that it had sold the consignment to a buyer, but had not provided the CFS with information on the buyer. The CFS had contacted major local retailers then. The concerned consignment of products was not found on sale in the local market. To address public concerns, the CFS advised members of the public to properly wash and thoroughly cook frozen meat and offal before consumption to minimise food safety risks. The information subsequently provided by the importer indicated that the consignment of products concerned had been re-exported to places outside Hong Kong.

13. In light of the incident, the CFS has immediately stepped up its verification checks of all the health certificates issued for frozen meat and poultry meat exported from Brazil to Hong Kong. So far, no other health certificates with product specification irregularities were identified. Meanwhile, the CFS has reported the case of suspected falsified health certificates to the Police, remained in contact with the Police and the Brazilian authorities, has followed up the case and taken actions as appropriate.

14. As mentioned in paragraph 9 above, after the Brazilian meat incident in March this year, the CFS has been discussing with the Brazilian authorities to enhance the import control of Brazilian products. The CFS is further reviewing the proposed import control arrangements in light of the falsified health certificates incident. Apart from discussing with the Brazilian authorities, the CFS will also maintain timely communication with local food traders and listen to their views regarding the list and the number of Brazilian meat plants.

15. In summary, the CFS has taken effective action upon the detection of suspected falsified health certificates, including:

- (a) reported the case to the Police;
- (b) successfully traced that none of the ten consignments of products had entered the local market;
- (c) for the sake of prudence, suspended the import of meat products from the two Brazilian plants and the Brazilian exporter concerned;
- (d) requested the Brazilian authorities to investigate the case, including to ensure the authenticity of the health certificates;
- (e) stepped up verification checks of all the health certificates issued for frozen meat and poultry meat exported from Brazil to Hong Kong;
- (f) continued enhancement of surveillance on Brazilian meat imports; and

- (g) discussed with the Brazilian authorities on more stringent import control of Brazilian meat products.

Conclusion

16. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

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