

(Translation)

**Legislative Council Public Accounts Committee
Public Hearing on Chapter 1 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 71
on 10 December 2018**

Centre for Food Safety: Management of Food Safety

Opening Remarks by Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene

Chairman,

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department is committed to safeguarding food safety in Hong Kong. I would like to thank the Audit Commission (Audit) for its audit on our food safety work. I agree with the recommendations made in the Director of Audit's Report (the Audit Report). Some of the recommendations have been put into practice and the rest are being actively pursued. I shall now give a concise response to the recommendations made in the Audit Report on food safety management by the CFS.

2. Our food safety work operates at various levels, which are closely intertwined. To ensure food safety in Hong Kong, the CFS adopts the risk analysis framework advocated by the Codex Alimentarius Commission to enhance food safety standards through its three components, namely, risk assessment, risk management and risk communication. In undertaking the regulatory function, the CFS adopts the risk-based principle that sets out priorities for performing gatekeeping at different levels, with a view to fully protecting local food safety on all fronts. Since the establishment of the CFS, the satisfactory rate of sampling tests under the Food Surveillance Programme (FSP) has remained high at over 99.8%. On the other hand, the number of food poisoning cases continues to decline and has dropped by more than 50% over the past decade. This indicates that food safety in Hong Kong is adequately protected under the existing regulatory regime.

3. The Audit Report pointed out the inadequacies in some aspects of our work and individual cases handled by the CFS, which touched upon problems in communication, supervision, staff training, operational guidelines, information management, etc.

4. The CFS has made improvements with respect to some recommendations put forward in the Audit Report and is actively pursuing some other recommendations for early implementation. For those recommendations which require a longer processing time, the CFS has laid down work plans to process them as soon as possible.

Food Safety Risk Assessment

5. Let me first talk about **food safety risk assessment**. Risk assessments are technically demanding as scientific research and investigations are involved. The CFS will take into consideration a host of factors, including the latest international standards and practices, and local risk assessment results, in updating the food safety standards in the legislation in a timely manner, so that the regulatory regime is in line with international practices for the protection of public health. Our follow-up actions in response to the recommendations on food safety risk assessment are listed below:

- (a) The CFS has been monitoring closely the progress of the Food Consumption Survey (FCS) currently underway to ensure early completion of the FCS;
- (b) The CFS is exploring feasible survey methodologies to conduct a food consumption survey for the younger population;
- (c) Upon the completion of the second FCS, the CFS will conduct the second Total Diet Study (TDS) to fully assess the potential impacts of the relevant substances in food on public health. In devising the second TDS, we will make reference to the evaluation results of the first TDS and the experience gained to improve the research methodologies and enrich the content of the study; and
- (d) In September 2018, the CFS adopted the new scoring mechanism proposed by the Expert Committee on Food Safety when deciding on topics for risk assessment studies for 2019. The new mechanism has worked well and the CFS will continue to ensure its smooth operation.

Food surveillance

6. Food surveillance is an important part of the risk management work of the CFS. Under the FSP, about 65 000 food samples are taken for testing each year for comprehensive surveillance of food safety. The CFS will keep the FSP under review having regard to such factors as changes of food hazards, legislative amendments and changes in the social environment. The programme will be adjusted as necessary under a risk-based approach to set out priorities for collecting food samples from different food groups and the range of substances to be tested, such as increasing the proportion of samples from food offered for sale on the Internet for microbiological tests.

7. The CFS agrees with the Audit's recommendations and has updated the food sampling guidelines to increase the number and variety of food samples taken from various retail outlets. For example, in collecting food samples at the retail level, the CFS has made reference to statistical data and set the food sampling ratio between "supermarkets, convenience stores and department stores" and "other retail outlets"

at 40:60. A set of operational guidelines was formulated accordingly. To ensure staff compliance with the guidelines the CFS has strengthened monitoring and supervision of the staff concerned, including conducting regular supervisory checking of food sampling records, monitoring the food types sampled and checking whether food samples are collected as required and proper records are maintained.

8. In general, the CFS will make an announcement within 24 hours after a food sample tested under the FSP was confirmed with unsatisfactory results. We are putting in place measures to minimise the time involved from collection of food samples to completion of testing.

Handling of Food Incidents and Complaints

9. Regarding handling of food incidents and risk management, the CFS generally completes risk assessment on a food incident within the same day the incident is brought to its attention. If the product concerned is available for sale in Hong Kong, the CFS will usually issue a press release on the same day. As for food complaints, an internal group led by directorate grade officer was set up in mid-2015 to provide timely and professional advice on food complaints of a complex nature. The CFS will also enhance its database of food complaints to strengthen the analysis of information of complaint cases to facilitate case management and review.

10. To ensure that food complaint cases are handled properly, we have revised the relevant operational guidelines and set a timeframe for investigating officers to follow up on food complaints and collect statements in respect of the complaint cases. A record of the follow-up actions is also required. Moreover, if the food in question is a seasonal or specific type of product, frontline staff should take an enforcement sample immediately so as to shorten the time for processing the complaint case.

Risk Communication

11. As for risk communication, we will further strengthen communication with the public for timely dissemination of information on food safety. The CFS will take public health impacts into account and be forthcoming in putting across its comments and advice to the public. It will make use of diverse channels, including the CFS website, electronic/social media and publications, to provide timely information to the public and the food trade for carrying out food safety education and publicity.

12. Once again, I thank Audit for its valuable recommendations on food safety management by the CFS. I myself, the Controller of the CFS and his colleagues, will actively take follow-up actions to implement improvement measures in safeguarding food safety in Hong Kong.

13. Thank you, Chairman.

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