

**Public Accounts Committee of the Legislative Council
Public Hearing on Chapter 2 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 71
7 January 2019**

Centre for Food Safety: Import Control of Foods

Opening Remarks by the Secretary for Food and Health

Chairman,

I would like to thank the Audit Commission for conducting a review and providing valuable comments on the import control of foods of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS). I agree with the findings of the Audit Report that there is room for improvement on various aspects of CFS' daily operation and the handling of individual cases. CFS must rectify those inadequacies as soon as possible.

2. As mentioned in my opening remarks at the hearing of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on Chapter 1 of the Audit Report on CFS' "Management of Food Safety", we attach great importance to safeguarding food safety. I have instructed the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) to follow up seriously and proactively the recommendations in the Audit Report and the upcoming PAC reports, and propose specific measures to improve the daily operation of CFS, with a view to strengthening public confidence in the food safety mechanism as well as CFS' work to safeguard food safety.

3. In the course of facilitating the Audit Commission in conducting the review, CFS had already noticed that there were inadequacies in some of its work and had taken or started various remedial actions, including providing staff with operational manuals and guidelines on work areas where there were no or inadequate guidelines, enhancing training and supervision of staff, and strengthening staff's law enforcement mindset and the keeping of data and records.

4. CFS already put in place a dedicated team in end 2017 to look closely at its operational workflow, enhance its mode of operation through information technology (IT) in import control of foods and food surveillance, revamp its IT systems and develop systems of high efficiency to support the work of its frontline staff more effectively, and strengthen its capability in data management and analysis. These measures will be rolled out in the next few years by phases according to their priorities, with a view to reinforcing CFS' capability in food surveillance, incident management, risk assessment and traceability. The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) will try its best to provide resource support for CFS to assist it to implement the recommendations of the Audit Commission and PAC.

5. Despite the inadequacies in certain aspects of CFS' daily operation, our food safety mechanism is sound and robust, and the food safety in Hong Kong has remained at a high standard.

6. Regarding the observations in the Audit Report on CFS' radiation tests on food imported from Japan, I have to make a few responses in order to allay any misunderstanding or concern of the public.

7. Since the Fukushima incident in 2011, CFS has made use of hand-held survey meters to comprehensively test the radioactivity level of food consignments imported from Japan. Hand-held survey meters are of high sensitivity and reliability and provide immediate readings on radioactivity level. The use of those meters for testing radioactivity is a method recognised by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The meter will discharge a sound to indicate that specific food consignment imported from Japan cannot pass the radiation test, whenever the radioactivity level of that consignment is slightly higher than the natural background radiation in Hong Kong.

8. Food consignments imported from Japan will be detained if they fail the radiation tests conducted by the hand-held survey meters. Samples will be taken from the detained consignments for further laboratory examination under the Contamination Monitoring System (CMS). Samples will also be taken from food consignments that have passed the tests by hand-held survey meters on a risk-based approach for examination under the CMS for additional safeguard.

9. While the guideline levels of radioactive Caesium-134 and Caesium-137 in food prescribed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) is 1000 Bacquerel per kilogram (Bq/kg), CFS has adopted an extremely prudent arrangement by setting the alert level of CMS at 15 Bq/kg. Despite the fact that there are inadequacies in the sampling process of food imported from Japan for examination under the CMS, they will not affect the test results of CMS. Food samples with radioactivity levels exceeding the guideline levels will not be misguided as satisfactory.

10. The Order to prohibit the import of certain foods from the five affected prefectures of Japan to Hong Kong came into effect on 24 March 2011. Over the years, CFS has tested over 550 000 samples of food imported from Japan. All food samples have not exceeded the Codex guideline levels.

11. The Audit Report also mentioned our work related to the updating of food safety standards. FHB and CFS have been closely monitoring the developments of Codex and international trend in the regulation of food hazards for timely review of the local food safety standards. FHB and CFS work closely on formulating directions for regulation of various food hazards and setting priorities on relevant legislations and legislative amendments, taking into consideration factors including unforeseeable food safety incidents, local dietary practice, risk assessment results, and views collected from public consultations etc.

12. We have all along spared no effort in regulating food hazards by means of legislation. Over the past decade, we updated the standards for preservatives and antioxidants in food, set new standards for melamine in food, introduced the Nutrition Labelling Scheme for prepackaged food, formulated the Nutritional Composition and Nutrition Labelling Scheme for formula products and food for infants, prohibited the use of Red 2G in food, updated the schedule of permitted sweeteners, enacted the Food Safety Ordinance and the Pesticide Residues in Food Regulation, imposed import control on poultry eggs, and completed the amendments to the Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) Regulation in October 2018. We plan to conduct public consultation on proposals to strengthen the regulation of harmful substances in food (including mycotoxins mentioned in the Audit Report) in 2019.

13. I would like to invite DFEH to respond to the key recommendations in the Audit Report on CFS' import control of foods. Thank you, Chairman.

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