

(Translation)

Legislative Council Public Accounts Committee
Public Hearing on Chapter 2 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 71
on 7 January 2019
Centre for Food Safety: Import Control of Foods
Opening Remarks by Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene

Chairman,

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) 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 reply to the recommendations raised in the Audit Report on import control of foods by the CFS.

Control of Foods Imported by Air, Land and Sea

2. To ensure the safety of imported foods, the CFS has established procedures for controlling food imports by air, land and sea. It will continue to strengthen staff supervision and training to ensure that officers of food control offices at air, land and sea borders adhere to the operational manuals and guidelines when performing their duties.

Control of Food Imports by Air

3. I am aware that the public is particularly concerned whether the CFS will issue import licences for foods imported by air only after all the required supporting documents have been received. My response is as follows:

- (a) Foods imported by air are mainly fresh provisions like chilled meat and poultry meat. Due to the short air freight time to Hong Kong, importers sometimes have difficulties submitting supporting documents (e.g. health certificates) when applying for import licences, as these documents may be shipped together with the consignments. Provided that food safety is not affected, the CFS will consider the circumstances of individual cases and facilitate business operation by allowing importers to present the original

supporting documents for custom clearance at the airport office. To ensure the safety of imported foods, officers at the airport office will examine the import documents of the food consignment concerned and conduct food inspections by adopting a risk-based approach.

- (b) The CFS has enhanced the supervision of these operations and reminded its staff that import licences should, as far as practicable, be issued only after the submission of supporting documents (e.g. copies of health certificates or import permissions). In early January 2019, the CFS issued new guidelines, requiring officers at the airport office to check the original health certificates and supporting documents of food consignments and inspect the consignments in accordance with a risk-based approach before release from the air cargo terminals, so as to ensure the safety of food imports.

4. In taking samples of imported foods, the CFS does not accept pre-selected food samples from importers. According to the operational manual, the operational staff must personally inspect each consignment of the targeted food by taking samples at random and examine the import documents. Taking into account the Audit's observations on individual cases, we have further reminded our staff to strictly comply with the relevant guidelines in checking the import documents of each food consignment and conducting food inspections in accordance with a risk-based approach. The CFS will formulate more detailed guidelines and strengthen supervisory inspections to ensure that its staff fully observe the guidelines when taking enforcement actions.

Control of Food Imports by Land

5. Regarding the control of foods imported by land, the CFS is aware of public concerns about vehicles with food consignments evading the CFS inspection at the Man Kam To Food Control Office (MKTFCO).

6. At present, the freight trade is required to provide specified information on the cargo and driver through the Land Cargo System (ROCARS) at least 30 minutes before the consignment is conveyed by truck across a land boundary control point for adequate risk assessment by the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED). All laden trucks entering or exiting Hong Kong through the land boundary control points have to make electronic declaration through the ROCARS, otherwise it constitutes an offence in law. The CFS is strengthening cooperation with the C&ED. It will take further steps to effectively deal with the problem of vehicles evading food inspections at the MKTFCO. Other measures are also

taken to ensure that vehicles have obtained prior approval from the CFS for carrying chilled food and to collect samples of frozen/chilled meat and poultry at random. The CFS will monitor and review the relevant guidelines so as to achieve the original purposes and meet operational needs.

Control of Food Imports by Sea

7. Regarding the control of foods imported by sea, the Audit suggested that the utilisation rate of the food control checkpoint at the Kwai Chung Customhouse (KCCH checkpoint) should be improved. Owing to intrinsic constraints (e.g. insufficient cold storage facilities for inspection/sampling), our inspection work at the KCCH checkpoint has been limited, resulting in a low usage rate of the checkpoint as compared with inspections conducted at warehouses or cold stores of importers. The CFS is actively considering the setting up of a formal food control office with chilling facilities at the KCCH checkpoint to enhance inspections of targeted food consignments imported by sea.

8. Under the existing practice, when targeted food consignments (including those related to importers with unsatisfactory track records or problem foods, as shown by intelligence) are imported by sea, the CFS will arrange compulsory physical inspections of the original sealed containers at the KCCH checkpoint. However, due to time and resource constraints, it is practically difficult for the CFS staff to witness the act of breaking the seals of containers when inspecting food consignments at warehouses or cold stores of importers. The CFS will sort out the discrepancies between the requirements of the operational manual and the actual inspection practices and consider revising the manual accordingly.

9. An importer may apply for a number of import licences and keep some of them unused so that when the meat consignment covered by a licence is selected for physical inspection, the importer can apply to cancel the import licence and use a spare licence to import the same meat consignment. To deal with the situation, the CFS has implemented an improvement measure by keeping a watch list of cancelled import licences. If a food consignment is not subjected to physical inspection by the CFS due to cancellation of the import licence, the cancelled licence will be put on the list. The same meat consignment imported by the same importer will still be directed by the FEHD for inspection.

10. Taking into account the actual operation of the trade, the CFS allows importers to apply for import licences with photocopies of health certificates, but the original health certificates must be submitted to the CFS for verification before the meat products concerned can be put up for sale. The CFS has taken improvement measures to select additional

import licences to make up for those licences cancelled with consignments not subjected to physical inspection.

Conclusion

11. Our food safety work operates at various levels, all are closely related. The CFS will continue to enhance communication and cooperation with the departments concerned to step up enforcement actions at the import level.

12. Apart from gatekeeping work at the import level, the CFS will continue to take a greater variety of food samples for tests at the wholesale and retail levels under the Food Surveillance Programme and play a monitoring role in different aspects to fully protect local food safety on all fronts.

13. In addition, we will continue to strengthen staff training and supervision to ensure that the information contained in import documents for foods imported by air, land and sea is correctly entered into the Food Import Control System. The CFS is overhauling its information technology system and reviewing the operational procedures by phases, with a view to re-engineering the work process and updating the information technology system for IT-enabled business transformation to meet the operational needs of its units and better safeguard food safety.

14. Thank you, Chairman.

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