For discussion on 11 June 2019

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Food Surveillance Programme and Safety of Food Groups of Concern

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the details of the Food Surveillance Programme (FSP) conducted by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) in 2018, improvement measures on the FSP, and the safety of individual food groups of public concern.

Food Surveillance Programme for 2018

2. To safeguard food safety, CFS takes food samples at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing under the FSP, and adopts a risk-based principle in determining the types and the sizes of samples to be collected and the laboratory analyses to be conducted.

3. In 2018, CFS collected about 66 000 samples for regular surveillance, targeted surveillance, seasonal surveillance and surveys on popular food items (the types of surveys and tests are set out at <u>Annex 1</u>). The overall satisfaction rate was 99.8%. CFS has taken follow-up actions regarding the 116 samples with unsatisfactory test results (details at <u>Annex 2</u>), including tracing the source of the food consignments concerned, informing the relevant authorities of the places of origin, requesting the importers/distributors to recall, stop selling and dispose of the implicated foods as needed, making public the incidents and explaining to the public the food safety risk concerned.

4. In addition, CFS has stepped up surveillance in light of food safety incidents, such as suspected infection with Listeria monocytogenes in Australian rockmelons and suspected contamination of E. coli O157:H7 in romaine lettuce from the United States last year. Immediate risk management measures were taken, including investigating whether the implicated foods were sold in Hong Kong and stepping up the sampling of the relevant food from the local market. The test results were all satisfactory.

Improvement Measures on the FSP

5. CFS reviews the FSP on an annual basis and from time to time during the year as and when necessary ¹. Having reviewed the implementation of the FSP, and taking into account the recommendations of the Audit Commission and the Public Accounts Committee of the Legislative Council, CFS has put in place the following improvement measures in 2019:

- (a) reallocated resources for testing pesticide residues in fruits and vegetables which are of relatively low risk to testing of other food hazards (e.g. metallic contaminants in foods), and increased the proportion of online food samples for microbiological testing;
- (b) promulgated new operational guidelines to frontline staff to revise the sampling ratio for different food outlets at the retail level with effect from October 2018 (details at <u>Annex 3</u>);
- (c) stepped up the supervision of the work of sampling officers, and continued to provide them with training and refresher courses, e.g. regular briefings on the sampling procedures. In addition, CFS would improve the sampling procedures through upgrading its information technology (IT) systems and reviewing the existing workflow;

¹ CFS takes into account factors including the food surveillance results, food incidents in Hong Kong and other economies, and relevant risk analyses in its regular reviews on the FSP.

- (d) promulgated new operational guidelines to staff, requiring samples to be delivered to the laboratories within 14 working days from the sampling date and setting out the contingency measures in case of changes in delivery schedules. The new operational guidelines have come into effect since has also updated the existing October 2018. CFS surveillance IT system² for close monitoring of the delivery time of samples and strengthening the supervision of staff to ensure their compliance with the deadline for sample delivery to the laboratories; and
- (e) streamlined the sampling procedures for seasonal food by taking enforcement samples straight away without the need to obtain surveillance samples first, so as to enhance the effectiveness of enforcement work.

Safety of Food Groups of Concern

Risk of Consuming Raw Fish

6. The Consumer Council published its study report on sashimi products in April this year, indicating that there were tuna samples detected to have methylmercury exceeding the maximum permitted concentration level of mercury under the existing legislation, and salmon and tuna samples found to have parasites and worm eggs. There have been public concerns over the risks of consuming the food concerned.

7. CFS has conducted various studies over the past decade on the health effects of methylmercury in fish. The results of the Total Diet Study published in 2013 showed that the health of the general population was unlikely to be affected by methylmercury, but 11% of women of childbearing age (i.e. aged between 20 and 49) had dietary exposure to methylmercury exceeding the health-based guidance values. However, fish contains

² CFS added a mandatory field in its Food Surveillance System (FSS) for recording the dates of sample delivery; and introduced a new email notification system in the FSS to remind sampling officers and Senior Health Inspectors of the deadline for sample delivery, and alert the Chief Health Inspector and the Superintendent concerned when the delivery deadline is missed.

various nutrients essential to the human body (e.g. Omega-3 fatty acids and high quality proteins) and the majority of fish contains low levels of methylmercury. Relatively high levels of methylmercury may be found mainly in certain large predatory fish or other specific species of fish (e.g. shark, swordfish, alfonsino and some tuna species). CFS has been advising that pregnant women, women planning pregnancy and young children should avoid eating these types of fish, and that the public are encouraged to maintain a balanced and diversified diet.

8. From January 2016 to April this year, CFS tested over 1 000 samples of different types of sashimi. Only 3 samples were detected to have total mercury levels exceeding the maximum level stipulated in the Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) Regulations (Cap. 132V). The results of the remaining samples were satisfactory.

9. CFS has been reminding the public of the food safety risk of consuming raw fish or other raw aquatic products, and advising that elderly people, infants and young children, pregnant women and people with lower immunity should avoid consuming these types of food. CFS has also been reminding the public of various points to note regarding the consumption of raw fish, including patronising reliable food premises and shops which are licensed or issued with permits for selling the food concerned.

10. Good aquaculture practices and/or freezing treatment can reduce the risk of parasites in aquatic products. The Code of Practice for Fish and Fishery Products issued by the Codex Alimentarius Commission states that freezing fish at -20°C or below for 7 days or at -35°C for about 20 hours can kill parasites therein. Even though the dead parasites remain in the fish, the risk of parasitic infection can still be effectively minimised. FEHD has been educating and reminding the trade to obtain from importers official health certificates issued by the places of origin, so as to ensure that the food concerned has been properly handled (e.g. has undergone good aquaculture practices and/or freezing treatment).

11. The Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X) stipulates that anyone involved in the sale of restricted foods (including sashimi, sushi, oysters to be eaten raw, etc.) or the provision of sashimi for consumption in a restaurant

is required to obtain permission from the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene. According to the licensing conditions, ingredients for preparing sashimi in food premises have to be properly stored and handled. FEHD conducts inspections to licensed food premises based on their risk levels to examine the hygiene conditions of the premises and check their compliance with the licensing conditions and the relevant statutory requirements.

Follow-up on the Brazilian Meat Incidents

12. In view of the Brazilian meat incident in March 2017^3 , CFS is currently imposing an import ban on the frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat (meat) from 21 meat plants in Brazil. Further, arising from a Brazilian meat incident⁴ in September of the same year relating to suspected falsified health certificates, CFS is currently suspending the import of meat from the Brazilian exporter and two Brazilian production plants.

13. Since the Brazilian meat incident of March 2017, CFS has stepped up surveillance of meat imported from Brazil for testing of meat deterioration and other food hazards (e.g. metallic contaminants, veterinary drug residues, pesticide residues, sorbic acid, nitrate and nitrite). Up to the end of April 2019, over 850 samples have been collected for testing. The testing results were all satisfactory.

14. The Brazilian authorities established an online checking system for health certificates of meat products in around March 2017 for the importing authorities and the trade to verify the authenticity of their health certificates. In checking the original copies of the health certificates of Brazilian meat imported into Hong Kong, CFS cross-checks the information of the relevant health certificates in the above online system, in order to verify the authenticity of the health certificates and prevent problematic meat from entering into Hong Kong.

³ In March 2017, there were product quality issues regarding some meat plants in Brazil, and the Brazilian authorities carried out investigations into suspected corruption or misconduct of their food safety control officials. The Brazilian authorities, after investigation, confirmed that there was no irregularity regarding the frozen and chilled meat and poultry exported to Hong Kong.

⁴ The health certificates of a number of consignments of frozen and chilled meat and poultry meat imported from Brazil were suspected to be falsified.

15. According to the existing agreement between Hong Kong and the Brazilian authorities on meat import, meat plants authorised by the Brazilian authorities for meat export to Hong Kong are allowed to do so, as long as they fulfil the food safety import requirements of Hong Kong (including the meat products should be accompanied with health certificate(s) issued by the Brazilian authorities and endorsed by CFS) and CFS has not banned the To improve the efficiency of food tracing in food import of their products. incidents, enhance the safeguard of food safety and further refine the import regulation of Brazilian meat, CFS has been discussing with the Brazilian authorities in the aftermath of the aforementioned incidents on the list and number of plants authorised to export meat to Hong Kong. Food safety condition of the plants (e.g. any unsatisfactory records in the past, quality assurance mechanism, products testing results, etc.) is the prime concern. CFS will consult the local trade and stakeholders in the process, with a view to striking a balance between enhancing food safety protection and trade facilitation.

Advice Sought

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

Food and Health Bureau Food and Environmental Hygiene Department Centre for Food Safety June 2019

Annex 1

<u>Surveillance and Survey Projects</u> <u>under 2018 Food Surveillance Programme</u>

(A) Regular Food Surveillance

Covering major food groups such as fruits and vegetables, meat, poultry, aquatic products, milk and cereals.

(B) <u>Targeted Food Surveillance</u>

- (i) Sulphur dioxide in meat
- (ii) Metallic contaminants in food
- (iii) Listeria monocytogenes in ready-to-eat foods
- (iv) Vibrio parahaemolyticus in ready-to-eat foods
- (v) Salmonella in ready-to-eat foods
- (vi) Coagulase-positive staphylococci organisms in ready-to-eat foods
- (vii) Bacillus cereus in ready-to-eat foods
- (viii) Clostridium perfringens in ready-to-eat foods

(C) Seasonal Food Surveillance

- (i) Lunar New Year food
- (ii) Rice dumplings
- (iii) Mooncakes
- (iv) Hairy crabs
- (v) Lap mei
- (vi) Poon choi

(D) Surveys on Popular Food Items

(i) Hot pot food and soup base

Annex 2

Unsatisfactory Samples under 2018 Food Surveillance Programme

Food groups	Number of samples tested*	Number of unsatisfactory samples (unsatisfactory rate)	Testing items (number of unsatisfactory samples)
Vegetables, fruits and related products	29 500	54 (0.18%)	Pesticides (37) Metallic contaminants (8) Preservatives (5) Undeclared allergens (3) Pathogens (1)
Meat, poultry and related products	5 700	9 (0.16%)	Preservatives (7) Veterinary drug residues (1) Pathogens (1)
Aquatic products and related products	5 500	22 (0.40%)	Veterinary drug residues (9) Metallic contaminants (9) Preservatives (2) Histamine (2)
Milk, milk products and frozen confections	10 000	15 (0.15%)	Hygiene indicators (13) Pathogens (2)
Cereals and cereal products	3 400	2 (0.06%)	Preservatives (1) Metallic contaminants (1)
Others	11 900	14 (0.12%)	Pathogens (9) Preservatives (2) Undeclared allergens (1) Veterinary drug residues (1) Aflatoxin (1)
Total	66 000	116 (0.18%)	

* Figures may not add up to the total due to rounding.

Annex 3

Revised Sampling Ratio at Retail Level under the FSP

With reference to the statistics on total retail sales of food and beverages in supermarkets/department stores and other retail outlets provided by the Census and Statistics Department, CFS has revised the sampling ratio for different food outlets at the retail level with effect from October 2018 as follows:

- i. Supermarkets, convenience stores and department stores (40%);
- ii. Groceries, shops and stores (20%);
- iii. Wet markets (15%);
- iv. Licensed food premises (other than food factories, frozen confection factories and milk factories) and cooked food stalls (15%); and
- v. Food factories, frozen confection factories and milk factories (10%).