

**For discussion
on 11 December 2018**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Certification System for Organic Food

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the certification system for organic food in Hong Kong, and the efforts of the Government and relevant organisations in promoting certification.

Standards for Organic Food

2. The major differences between organic and ordinary food are the ways of production, processing and handling¹. Such differences cannot be detected by testing the food products. Insofar as food safety is concerned, organic food has no notable differences with ordinary food. All food for sale in Hong Kong for human consumption (whether organic or ordinary food) must comply with the statutory standards for food safety, quality and labelling to ensure its fitness for human consumption.

3. At present, there are no internationally applicable and mutually recognised standards for organic food. Since the definitions and certification standards on “organic” food vary among different economies, organic food usually carries labels issued by individual certification bodies to indicate that the food has met the organic production and processing standards of specific places or organisations.

Recommendations of the Consultancy Study

4. The Government commissioned a consultancy study in 2011 to assess the need for regulating the production and sale of organic food (including organic agricultural products) in Hong Kong. In view of the

¹ The principles of organic farming normally include:

- (a) rely on ecological management and produce crops in an environmentally friendly and sustainable manner;
- (b) no chemical pesticides and fertilizers and genetically engineered materials are used;
- (c) work in harmony with nature and preserve biological diversity; and
- (d) adopt organic practices to manage pests and maintain soil fertility.

small scale of the local organic food sector and the fact that the Government's main policy objectives in respect of food are to safeguard food safety and supply stability, the consultancy report advised that there was no pressing need to introduce legislation to specifically regulate organic food products in Hong Kong.

5. The consultant recommended the Government to enhance consumer education and promote certification of organic products by administrative measures to enrich consumers' knowledge of organic food. Having reported the recommendations of the consultancy study to the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene in 2013, the Government has been supporting the trade to promote certification of local organic food and undertake related publicity and education in line with the direction of the recommendations.

Promoting Certification of Local Organic Food

6. Locally produced organic food mainly comprises agricultural products and cultured fish. Regarding agricultural products, about 300 crop farms in Hong Kong participated in the Organic Farming Support Service (OFSS)² provided by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). Over 2 000 tonnes of organic agricultural products are produced annually on average for sale through various channels, including wholesale through the Vegetable Marketing Organisation (VMO), or direct sale in weekend farmers' markets, supermarkets and wet markets. Regarding cultured fish, there are eight organic fish farms (mainly producing jade perch) with an average annual production of about 8.7 tonnes of organic fisheries products, which are normally sold in farmers' markets.

7. With funding from the Agricultural Development Fund under the VMO, the Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre (HKORC) has been providing voluntary organic certification services to the sector since December 2002. HKORC is accredited by the International Federation of

² AFCD launched in 2000 the Organic Farming Conversion Scheme (later renamed as the OFSS) to help farmers transform from conventional farming to organic farming through the provision of technical support, including horticultural skills, soil fertility management, pest and disease control and seed saving, with a view to facilitating them to open up new markets and enhance their competitiveness by producing high quality agricultural products.

Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)³ and has formulated a set of Organic Production, Aquaculture and Processing Standards with reference to the IFOAM guidelines. HKORC conducts visits to the production sites of the applicants for organic certification to inspect and keep records on their production, storage, processing, handling and sales. HKORC will award certification certificates to the applicants and allow them to show the HKORC label on their products, upon endorsement by HKORC's vetting committee comprising professionals that the applicants have met its organic certification standards.

8. Currently, about 140 crop farms (i.e. nearly half of the crops farms which have participated in AFCD's OFSS), eight fish farms (i.e. all of the local organic fish farms) and seven food processing plants have been certified by HKORC. The certified production units are subject to HKORC's regular and spot checks for ensuring continued compliance with HKORC's certification standards and requirements.

9. HKORC raises public awareness on organic certification and labelling through different channels, including organising publicity and educational activities such as the Organic Day and the Organic Ambassador Training Scheme. It also provides on its website information such as the organic labels commonly seen in Hong Kong⁴ and the scenarios of organic labels for agricultural and aquaculture products in the local market, to facilitate consumers in identifying organic products.

10. Since 2013, HKORC has been organising the Quality Retailer Programme and the Top Organic Retailer Programme on an annual basis. Through site visits to the participating retailers, HKORC conducts assessments on those retailers in terms of purchasing, storage, package / label descriptions, sales and staff training in regard to organic products. Based on the assessments, HKORC evaluates whether the retailers meet the basic operating standards of carrying out retail businesses on organic food (including full record keeping to ensure the procurement of certified organic products, clear indication on product package of the certification organisations concerned, proper measures and inspection procedures to ensure no mix-up of organic and non-organic products, no misleading

³ IFOAM is an international non-governmental organisation for voluntary participation by organisations and private firms involved in organic agriculture around the world.

⁴ According to HKORC, other commonly seen organic labels in Hong Kong include Mainland China's "中國有機產品認證", Australian Certified Organic, EU Organic Bio, JAS of Japan, Soil Association of UK and USDA Organic etc. Details can be found on HKORC's website (www.hkorc.org).

publicity and display of products, provision of staff training on knowledge relating to organic products etc.). Retailers of organic food that conform to a professional operating model are selected and commended under the Programmes. Those retailers are also listed on HKORC's website for public access, with a view to encouraging the healthy development of the local organic market.

11. Through their websites and mobile applications, HKORC and VMO provide information to the public on the availability of organic food for sale, such as different sales platforms for local organic agricultural products and other organic food, which helps enhance the confidence of local organic food consumers.

Conclusion

12. The Government will continue to support the production and certification of organic food in Hong Kong along the direction of supporting the trade to pursue voluntary certification and carry out publicity and education.

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