

**For discussion
on 9 March 2021**

Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Food Surveillance Programme

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the implementation of the Food Surveillance Programme (FSP) by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) in 2020, and the preventive measures taken against the risk of importation of the COVID-19 virus through imported frozen foods.

Food Surveillance Programme 2020

2. To ensure food safety, the 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 numbers of food samples to be collected and the laboratory analyses to be performed.

3. In 2020, the CFS collected about 66 600 samples for regular surveillance and targeted surveys (projects listed in **Annex 1**). The testing results of all samples, except for 99, were found satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.9%. The unsatisfactory samples were mainly detected with hygienic indicators, metallic contaminants, pesticide or veterinary drug residues exceeding the relevant standards (details in **Annex 2**). The CFS has taken appropriate follow-up actions regarding these samples, including tracing the sources of the food consignments concerned, informing the relevant authorities of the places of origin, instructing venders to stop selling the identified batches of foods, requesting the importers/distributors to recall and dispose of the implicated foods as needed, making public announcements and explaining to the public the food safety risks involved, etc.

4. The CFS has been closely monitoring the food surveillance results, food incidents in Hong Kong and other places and relevant risk analyses to keep the implementation of the FSP under regular review. In 2020, the CFS reviewed the situation and reallocated some of the resources for testing pesticide residues in fruits and vegetables, which were of relatively low risk, to the testing of other food hazards like metallic contaminants. The key aspects of our work are set out in the following paragraphs.

Metallic Contaminants in Food

5. The Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) (Amendment) Regulation 2018 (Cap. 132V) (the Amendment Regulation) took full effect on 1 November 2020¹. The CFS has suitably allocated resources to step up surveillance on metallic contaminants in food to monitor compliance with the Amendment Regulation.

6. From 2016 to October 2019, the CFS conducted testing for metallic contaminants on more than 21 800 samples under the FSP. 75 samples were found unsatisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.7%. From 1 November 2019 to the end of December 2020, about 8 900 samples were tested for metallic contaminants. Only 26 samples were detected with metallic contaminants exceeding the relevant standards or in an amount considered dangerous or prejudicial to health according to risk assessments². The overall satisfaction rate of 99.7% was comparable to that recorded before the implementation of the Amendment Regulation. The CFS has followed up on the test results.

Online Food Sale

7. In recent years, e-commerce, including food transactions via the Internet, mobile applications or social media platforms (hereafter referred to as

¹ With the Amendment Regulation coming into force, the number of metallic contaminants regulated has increased from 7 to 14 and the number of maximum levels for metallic contaminants in respect of different foods has risen from 19 to 144. The Amendment Regulation first took effect on 1 November 2019 on certain types of fresh food with a shorter shelf life (i.e. fresh fruit and vegetable and their juices, fresh meat and edible offal of animal and poultry, aquatic animals and poultry eggs). It is applicable to all foods from 1 November 2020 onwards.

² For food/food groups without relevant maximum levels stipulated in the Amendment Regulation, the CFS conducts risk assessments to determine whether the metal concerned in the food is in an amount that is dangerous or prejudicial to health.

“online food sale”), has become increasingly popular. In response, the CFS has been closely monitoring the safety of food put up for sale online. Since 2016, the number of online food samples collected for testing per year has more than doubled from about 1 500 to about 4 000, with a larger proportion assigned for microbiological testing year on year. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 4 600 online food samples were tested under the FSP in 2020. The testing results of all samples, except for 14, were found satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.7%. The unsatisfactory samples were mainly fruits and vegetables, aquatic products and meat with metallic contaminants, pesticide residues or preservatives exceeding the relevant safety standards. Details are in **Annex 3**.

8. Among the online food samples collected last year, about 220 samples were purchased from online takeaway platforms. All these samples, except for one, were tested with satisfactory results. The unsatisfactory sample was a ready-to-eat meat product detected with pathogenic *Salmonella*. The CFS has taken appropriate follow-up actions, including informing the vendor concerned of the test result and instructing the person-in-charge to stop selling the food item immediately. The CFS has also inspected the licensed food premises which supplied the food item, provided health education on food safety and hygiene to the person-in-charge and staff of the premises, and requested the premises to review and improve its food production process and carry out thorough cleaning and disinfection.

9. In addition, the CFS issued a reminder on the points to note about food delivery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic to major local online food delivery service providers in mid-2020, urging them to maintain a high standard of cleanliness and hygiene, as well as work with licensed food premises to ensure proper temperature control for delivered foods (i.e. above 60°C for hot food and below 4°C for cold food) and minimise the time that these foods are left out of temperature control for safeguarding food safety. The situation has been generally satisfactory.

10. The FEHD will keep up efforts to closely monitor online food sale activities, including online food business operators that are not involved in food production and do not have physical premises. If FEHD officers suspect that any online food sale activity is in breach of the statutory requirements or have doubts about the source and safety of the food put up for sale, they will conduct

investigations, including decoy operations by posing as customers to make food purchases in collecting evidence and information for taking appropriate actions.

Surveillance on Meat

11. Last year, the CFS collected about 6 100 samples of meat, poultry and their products for testing under the FSP. The testing results of all samples, except for four, were found satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.9%. The unsatisfactory samples were mainly detected with *Salmonella* (including the sample purchased from an online takeaway platform as mentioned above and another sample taken directly from a licensed food premises). The remaining unsatisfactory samples were tested with excessive veterinary drug residue and preservative in frozen pork and fresh beef respectively.

12. Regarding recent concerns over Beta-adrenergic agonists (β -agonists), commonly known as “leanness enhancing agents”, the CFS collected nearly 1 000 samples of pork, beef and related products (including offal) for testing in the past five years, with 166, 190, 202, 194 and 186 samples tested in the respective years from 2016 to 2020. Only two frozen beef samples taken in early 2016 were detected with ractopamine³ slightly exceeding the maximum residue limit laid down by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex). All other samples were tested with satisfactory results. During the same period, the CFS did not receive any report of food poisoning cases involving β -agonists.

13. The FEHD will continue to inspect fresh provision shops and market meat stalls, and follow up on reports against the sale of chilled or frozen pork as fresh pork. From 2016 to 2020, the FEHD initiated five prosecutions against fresh provision shops or market stalls under the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X) for selling fresh pork and un-prepackaged chilled pork in the same premises, with four cases convicted and one case pending trial in the court. During the same period, the FEHD cancelled the fresh provision shop licence of another fresh provision shop which breached the licensing condition in selling chilled pork as fresh pork.

³ The Codex has set standards on safe intake of ractopamine from food for international reference. In 2016, the CFS made reference to the Codex standards and established the same action levels for ractopamine residue in the tissues of food animals. Ractopamine, if any, contained in all locally produced or imported pork, beef and related products should not exceed the action levels. Once found, the CFS will take appropriate follow-up actions.

Preventing the Risk of Importation of the COVID-19 Virus through Imported Frozen Foods

14. Adhering to the strategy of “preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community” with respect to COVID-19, the CFS implemented a series of preventive measures last year against the risk of importation of the virus through imported frozen foods.

15. Noting the earlier cases in the Mainland since mid-2020 that the COVID-19 virus was detected on imported frozen foods or their packaging, the CFS has immediately stepped up, at the import level, testing of various types of frozen foods and their packaging imported from different countries/regions, which involves taking samples at its Airport Food Inspection Offices and the cold stores of importers. As at the end of February 2021, more than 4 700 related samples were collected for testing. The test results were all negative. The CFS will continue the surveillance on imported frozen foods and their packaging to closely monitor the risk of importation of the virus through imported frozen foods.

16. Under the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612), food importers and food distributors must register with the CFS and keep records of their food movement. If the virus is detected on imported frozen foods or their packaging, the CFS will trace the source and make contingency arrangements promptly based on the relevant records.

17. To further monitor the risks in the process of handling frozen foods, the FEHD has arranged voluntary and free COVID-19 testing for practitioners of licensed cold stores on an ongoing basis since November 2020. As at the end of February 2021, 5 100 samples were tested. The test results were all negative. The FEHD will continue to provide voluntary and free testing services for practitioners of licensed cold stores. Persons who have undergone the tests are also entitled for retesting.

18. For the purpose of enhancing protection for food handlers, the CFS, in consultation with the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health, issued the “Health Advice for Frozen Food Handlers on the Prevention of COVID-19” (the Advice) to the food trade in November 2020, reminding frozen food handlers of the potential risks of infection and the need to take precautionary

measures such as observing good personal hygiene practices, putting on personal protection equipment, and maintaining environmental hygiene and social distancing. The FEHD noted that the trade had actively responded to the Advice and put in place measures against the pandemic.

19. Furthermore, the CFS initiated discussions with cold store operators on the stepping up of disinfection of the outer package of imported frozen foods and the working environment of cold stores in November 2020. The major cold store operators were supportive. In December 2020, the CFS issued the “Prevention of COVID-19 - Guidance on Disinfecting the Working Environment and the Food Package of Cold Stores at Import Level” to licensed cold stores with suggested preventive measures, covering the types of disinfectant and their usage, precautions for the use of chlorine-based disinfectants and personal protection measures. The CFS will continue to work with the frozen food trade to enhance the anti-epidemic work with regard to imported frozen foods.

Advice Sought

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

**Food and Health Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
Centre for Food Safety
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Projects under Food Surveillance Programme 2020

(A) Regular Food Surveillance

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

(B) Targeted Food Surveillance

- (i) Metallic contaminants in food
- (ii) Sulphur dioxide in meat
- (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 bases

Sample Test Results of Food Surveillance Programme 2020

Food groups	Number of samples tested*	Number of unsatisfactory samples (unsatisfactory rate)	Testing items (number of unsatisfactory samples)
Vegetables, fruits and related products	26 100	25 (0.10%)	Pesticide residues (13) Metallic contaminants (8) Preservatives (3) Pathogens (1)
Milk, milk products and frozen confections	13 300	32 (0.24%)	Hygiene indicators (30) Composition (2)
Aquatic products and related products	6 800	18 (0.26%)	Veterinary drug residues (9) Metallic contaminants (8) Undeclared allergens (1)
Meat, poultry and related products	6 100	4 (0.07%)	Pathogens (2) Veterinary drug residues (1) Preservatives (1)
Cereals and cereal products	3 500	2 (0.08%)	Metallic contaminants (2)
Others	10 700	18 (0.17%)	Patulin (5) Pathogens (3) Preservatives (3) Colouring matters (2) Undeclared allergens (2) Veterinary drug residues (1) Composition (1) Hygiene indicators (1)
Total	66 600	99 (0.15%)	

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

2020 Online Food Surveillance Results

Food groups	Number of samples tested*	Number of unsatisfactory samples (unsatisfactory rate)	Testing items (number of unsatisfactory samples)
Vegetables, fruits and related products	991	5 (0.50%)	Pesticide residues (2) Metallic contaminants (2) Preservatives (1)
Aquatic products and related products	866	3 (0.35%)	Metallic contaminants (3)
Cereals and cereal products	700	1 (0.14%)	Metallic contaminants (1)
Meat, poultry and related products	600	2 (0.33%)	Pathogens (1) # Preservatives (1)
Milk, milk products and frozen confections	153	0 (N/A)	N/A
Others*	1 292	3 (0.23%)	Colouring matters (2) Preservatives (1)
Total	4 602	14 (0.30%)	

* Other foods include eggs and egg products, rice dishes, noodles and pasta, dim sum, dishes, salads, pizza, sandwiches and burgers, desserts, bakery wares, soups, drinks, etc.

A ready-to-eat meat product purchased from an online takeaway platform.