

**For discussion
on 8 June 2021**

Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Enhancement of the Information Technology Systems of
the Centre for Food Safety**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the latest progress in enhancing the information technology (IT) systems of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department.

Enhancement of the IT Systems of the CFS

2. To implement the long term strategies for IT-enabled business transformation, the CFS fully reviewed its IT systems at the end of 2017 and started to plan to enhance the systems to increase efficiency, reinforce its capability in food import control and surveillance, improve the effectiveness of food incident management and step up food traceability. The CFS is currently developing and setting up/updating in stages its five IT systems, namely the Food Trader Portal (FTP), the Food Import and Export Control System (FIECS), the Food Incident Management System (FIMS), the Food Surveillance System (FSS) and the Food Classification and Coding System (FCCS), in order of priorities.

Food Trader Portal

3. The FTP is a one-stop electronic platform for communication between food traders and the CFS. Launched in stages since December 2019, the FTP aims at strengthening the CFS' capability in food import control, streamlining workflows and facilitating the trade through IT applications. The import-related functions of the FTP, covering regulated food, namely, meat, poultry, game, milk, frozen confections and eggs, were completed in phases and fully implemented in late May 2021, putting into practice the use of IT to strengthen import control of the food concerned. Food traders can now register online as food importers and/or distributors, renew registration or update trader information by electronic means. Moreover, food importers can also apply online for import licences for meat and poultry and import permissions for meat, poultry, game, milk, frozen confections and eggs, and report the information regarding arrival of food consignments in Hong Kong.

4. In tandem with the launch of the online application platform, the Import Licensing Office of the CFS has increased its working days from five days to seven

days a week since the end of March 2020, with operation hours extended to 9:00 p.m. from Monday to Friday, for expeditious handling of online applications for import licences. The time required for processing an online application for import licence for the import of meat and poultry by air as well as the import of chilled meat and poultry by land has generally been shortened to a few hours. With the online service, applicants are no longer required to send staff to submit application forms to and obtain import licences or import permissions from the CFS in person. Through access to the online system, they can also check their application status and records of past applications.

5. The provision of IT support enables the CFS to refine the application procedures on the one hand and strengthen control at the import level on the other hand. All applicants have to produce health certificates/export declarations to apply for import licences for meat or poultry. The new system also helps put an end to acts of cancellation of import licenses to evade physical inspections. The system has set rules such that if the import licence of a consignment of meat or poultry selected for physical inspection is cancelled and the importer subsequently re-applies for an import licence for the same consignment, the consignment will automatically be targeted by the system for physical inspection. Furthermore, to facilitate the trade in applying for import licences, ensure accuracy of the information required for submission and enhance the efficiency of the CFS in processing applications for import licences, the CFS has established government to government (G2G) platforms with the Mainland, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands for direct issue and receipt of electronic health certification. The CFS will continue to explore the feasibility of developing G2G electronic health certification arrangements with other countries/places.

6. Regarding report of arrival of food consignments in Hong Kong and release of the consignments, importers only need to log in to the FTP to submit the food consignment arrival information by filling in details and uploading the required documents. After the report is accepted, the CFS will contact importers regarding inspection and release of the food consignment so that the importers can prepare in advance before the food consignment arrives in Hong Kong, such as making early appointment with CFS staff for physical inspection, in order to minimize the time required for processing the release of the consignment. Upon completion of all procedures, the CFS will issue the release letter through the FTP. Importers will also receive notifications by email immediately, thus saving the time for mail delivery.

7. Food importers may still choose to submit their applications in paper form. However, with the launch of the online services, more than 3 300 food importers and distributors have successfully registered or renewed their registration via the FTP as at the end of March 2021. In the first quarter of 2021, about 490 importers of meat, poultry, game, milk or frozen confections (accounting for about 75% of the total of such applicants) used the FTP to apply for import licences or import permissions. Furthermore, more than 92% of import licences and import permissions are applied for and issued through the FTP, i.e., the majority of the applications are no longer dealt with in paper mode.

Other Major IT Systems

8. In parallel with the development of the FTP, the CFS is developing the new FIECS to replace internal systems in use for years and support various internal operations with respect to import and export of food. Apart from supporting the vetting of applications for import licences and import permissions, the new FIECS can also record details such as document checks, physical inspections and food consignment arrivals, and issue release letters and other notices to importers through the FTP. The FIECS will be equipped with automated functions, such as verifying the information declared in applications for import licences, random selection of food consignments for physical inspection, and verifying information about arrival of food consignments in Hong Kong. It will also process applications for food export certification. The use of computer to facilitate data processing and work procedures will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of food import control. The FIECS is expected to be completed by the end of 2022.

9. The CFS is developing a standardized FCCS, under which different food products are assigned a code to make food classification more exact, detailed and clear. FCCS classifies and encodes different food types for use by the related IT systems to facilitate recording, retrieval and analysis of food data for more effective and targeted risk assessment and enhanced food traceability. The whole set of food classification and coding was completed and gradually put into use with the launching of the online services of the FTP that it was fully rolled out in May 2021. The FCCS is expected to be completed by the third quarter of 2021.

10. The FIMS is another new system to be established by the CFS to strengthen its effectiveness in recording and tracing the actions taken by relevant units of the CFS in food incidents, so as to enhance monitoring of the progress of follow-up actions including food recalls. The FIMS is equipped with a knowledge base on risk assessments and related reference materials for effective and accurate retrieval of past records to enable quick access by the CFS when encountering similar food incidents in future. At the same time, the FIMS can trace the sources of problematic foods to help the CFS issue clear guidelines to food importers and distributors in the first instance to enhance effectiveness in tracing, interception and recall of the foods concerned, as well as to devise follow-up actions. The FIMS is expected to be completed by the end of 2021.

11. Other than establishing new IT systems, the CFS will also revamp the existing FSS to step up food surveillance. The revamp is expected to be completed by the end of 2022. A database of retail stores will be set up under the FSS to refine the present approach of selecting and collecting food samples for surveillance by the CFS. Use of IT computation to pre-arrange the locations and proportions of food sampling can increase objectivity and data representativeness. The FSS will also interface with the FIECS, such that if food requiring the collection of samples for surveillance is identified at the import level, the system will quickly alert the CFS staff concerned. Moreover,

information on the food samples and food importers can be loaded into the FSS automatically, which would reduce the work involved in repeated manual input and verification of data, thus improving sampling efficiency and record accuracy.

12. The above IT systems will interface with each other to provide a well-connected information network in support of risk profiling and risk-based surveillance for strengthened food safety control and traceability. The CFS has completed development of the FTP and has rolled out all services related to food importation. The FCCS and the FIMS are expected to be completed in 2021 while the completion of FIECS and the FSS are expected by the end of 2022. Upon completion of the five systems, they will interface with each other, and interfacing is expected to be completed by the first quarter of 2024 or earlier.

Advice Sought

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

Food and Health Bureau

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June 2021