

Your ref.: CB2/PL/FE

Our ref.: FEHD/CFS 1-55/10/15

24 June 2021

Ms Josephine SO

Clerk to Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Legislative Council Complex

1 Legislative Council Road

Central, Hong Kong

Dear Ms SO,

**Enhancement of the Information Technology Systems of
the Centre for Food Safety and Regulation of Food Imports**

At the meeting of the Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 8 June 2021, the Hon Tony TSE and other Members requested us to provide supplementary information. Our consolidated reply is as follows.

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) started a comprehensive review of its information technology (IT) systems at the end of 2017 with a view to developing and enhancing five major IT systems. The systems have been set up and rolled out in phases according to the schedule. The work is progressing well without any delay. The five systems together with the completion schedule are as follows –

	System	Completion schedule
(1)	Food Trader Portal (FTP)	Rolled out in phases since the end of 2019 and fully implemented in May 2021
(2)	Food Classification and Coding System (FCCS)	Rolled out in phases since March 2020 and to be fully implemented in July 2021
(3)	Food Incident Management System (FIMS)	To be completed by the end of 2021
(4)	Food Import and Export Control System (FIECS)	To be completed in 2022
(5)	Food Surveillance System (FSS)	

The systems will interface with each other upon completion and the interfacing is expected to be completed by the first quarter of 2024 or earlier.

Under the Food Safety Ordinance (Cap. 612), any person who carries on a food importation/distribution business through electronic or other means is required to register with the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene as a food importer/distributor. If food is imported solely in the course of business of a food transport operator, the operator is exempted from the registration requirement. Food importers/distributors can make the registration application to the FEHD either through the FTP or in paper mode having regard to their operational needs.

In addition, as required by the Import and Export Ordinance (Cap. 60), a food importer has to obtain an import licence for import of frozen/chilled meat and poultry meat. Importers are required to provide the relevant documentary proofs (e.g. a health certificate issued by the exporting place) when applying for an import licence. Before the launch of the online submission service under the FTP, it usually took three working days for the CFS to process a paper-based import licence application. Besides, as foods imported by air were mainly fresh provisions, the trade expressed that the health certificates might be shipped together with the food consignments due to the short air freight time to Hong Kong and could not be submitted with the application for an import licence. In the past, the CFS would, provided that food safety was not affected, consider the circumstances of individual cases and facilitate business operation by allowing importers to present the original health certificates for clearance of food consignments at the Airport Food Inspection Office (AFIO). Officers at the AFIO would examine the documents concerned and conduct food inspections by adopting a risk-based approach.

With the launch of the FTP, the Food Importer/Distributor Registration and Import Licensing Office of the CFS has extended its operation hours. The time required for processing an import licence application has been shortened substantially from three working days to several hours. Moreover, food importers can upload the images of health certificates onto the FTP before their food consignments arrive in Hong Kong. The trade no longer has a problem in submitting health certificates timely and granting of discretions is not required. For more than a year since the commissioning of the FTP, the CFS has maintained close liaison with trade members, who remark that the portal has been operating smoothly without any issues so far.

The launch of the FTP is accompanied by a new function with which each import licence is linked to a particular health certificate to ensure that no multiple import licences will be issued for the same health certificate. This resolved the issue raised in the Audit Report pertaining to importers using the same health certificate to apply for a number of import licences for spare use, and it is no longer necessary to identify and cancel any spare and unused import licences. An import licence is valid for six weeks and will lapse automatically on expiry. The FTP is capable of tracing the use of an import licence and identifying expired import licences. If an import licence is used after its expiry date, it will constitute an offence. The CFS will take follow-up action on any such case detected.

Regarding the supervision of vehicles and containers conveying chilled meat and poultry, the frontline staff at the Man Kam To Food Control Office of the CFS will release the consignment only when the inspection results and the hygienic conditions of the vehicle or container concerned are confirmed satisfactory. If a vehicle or its chilled meat and poultry is found not complying with the relevant requirements during inspection, the food consignment will be detained to make sure that it will not enter the market. The CFS will issue a warning letter, requesting the importer to rectify the irregularities and arrange for a reassessment of the vehicle or container. If the requirements are still not met, the CFS will institute prosecution in accordance with the Imported Game, Meat, Poultry and Eggs Regulations (Cap. 132AK). Offenders shall be liable on conviction to a maximum fine of HK\$50,000 and imprisonment for six months.

For the testing of food samples at import level, about 36 000, 36 000 and 37 000 samples were collected in 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively under the Food Surveillance Programme of the CFS. The average unsatisfactory rate was around 0.1%. Within the same period, the CFS conducted radiation tests on about 34 000 food consignments categorised as “drinks and others” (including wines) imported from Japan, about 2 400 of which were from Fukushima and the four neighbouring prefectures (namely Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Gunma). The radiation test results of all samples were satisfactory. Besides, about 5 800, 5 100 and 4 000 food complaints were received in the respective years. While the CFS does not have a breakdown to indicate whether the complaints are related to imported foods or not, the number of complaint cases showed a decreasing trend.

As for combating import and export smuggling activities, the FEHD will coordinate with the relevant law enforcement agency (i.e. the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED)) in their work. If any irregularities in the import of regulated foods are detected, the CFS will inform the C&ED to investigate and take follow-up actions accordingly.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tse Oi-yee', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

(Ms TSE Oi-yee)

for Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene

c.c. Food and Health Bureau