

**For discussion
on 13 July 2021**

Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Impact of the Discharge of Wastewater
from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant into the Ocean
on Food Safety and Import Control on Japanese Food**

Purpose

This paper outlines the follow-up actions undertaken by the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) in response to the plan announced by the Japanese Government to discharge the wastewater generated in the process of cooling the reactors at the Fukushima nuclear power station (FNPS) into the ocean, and the possible impact of the wastewater discharge on food safety and import control of Japanese food.

Wastewater of Fukushima Nuclear Power Station

2. The Japanese Government announced earlier the plan to discharge the wastewater generated in the process of cooling the reactors at the FNPS into the ocean in about two years' time (i.e. 2023). The plan has aroused concerns from the public and the international community. Since the wastewater contains various radionuclides¹, we understand that many organisations, fishery operators and members of the public are concerned that the discharge of wastewater into the ocean would have a serious impact on the marine ecosystem, the food chain and food safety. We have made it clear to the Japanese authorities that they should not discharge the wastewater from the FNPS into the ocean unilaterally without the consensus of the international community in order to avoid causing irreversible damage to the environment.

¹ The wastewater to be discharged from the FNPS is the water which has been directly injected into the melted reactor cores of the FNPS to lower the temperature of the reactors. As the wastewater has direct contact with active raw materials of the nuclear reactor, it contains a high concentration of radioactive substances.

Impact on Food Safety

3. As the wastewater has a high concentration of radioactive substances, it has to be treated before discharge. According to the Japanese authorities, about 70% of the treated wastewater stored at the FNPS still has radiation exceeding Japan's standard, and needs to be further treated before discharge into the ocean. However, the radionuclide tritium could not be removed even after further treatment, and trace amounts of radionuclides such as carbon-14, iodine, ruthenium, strontium and cobalt may still remain in the treated wastewater. As we understand it, the discharge of the wastewater will carry on for years. We have grave concerns as to how the Japanese authorities can ensure that all radionuclides contained in the wastewater to be discharged meet the safety standards and will not pose potential threats to marine ecosystem and food safety. We are also concerned whether there are better alternatives for disposal of the wastewater other than discharging it into the ocean.

4. The FHB is extremely concerned about the impact of the discharge plan on food safety and has demanded the Japanese authorities to provide data on various aspects and information on control and surveillance. We have relayed clearly to the Japanese authorities that they shall respond proactively to the concerns of the international community and the public, and disclose all information relating to the wastewater discharge plan of the FNPS in a highly transparent manner, in order to maintain public's confidence in the safety of imported food from Japan. We have emphasized that the Japanese authorities should not discharge the wastewater unilaterally without the consensus of the international community in order to avoid causing irreversible damage to the environment.

5. We note that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of China has urged the Japanese authorities to properly handle the wastewater generated from the FNPS and we fully support the stance of MFA. Given that issues such as pollution to the ocean are international issues in the realm of foreign affairs, we have relayed the concerns of various sectors to the Office of the Commissioner of MFA in Hong Kong.

6. It is understood that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has proposed to set up a technical working group to follow up on and monitor Japan's discharge of the wastewater. As remarked by the MFA, the IAEA has confirmed that

it would invite experts from the Mainland to join the technical working group currently being set up. We will carefully examine the information provided by the Japanese authorities and the assessments made by international expert organisations, etc., and conduct risk assessments with relevant government departments as appropriate to determine the corresponding measures to be adopted to safeguard public health and safety of imported food.

Control on Food Imported from Japan

7. According to the statistics of the Census and Statistics Department, the major food imports from Japan amount to about 1.3% of the total food supply in Hong Kong. Following the incident at the FNPS, we have imposed additional control measures on imported Japanese food on top of the list of food products prohibited for export by Japan. Currently, apart from food products prohibited for export by the Japanese authorities, all vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from Fukushima are prohibited for import into Hong Kong. In addition, a radiation certificate and an exporter certificate are required for import of all vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from the four neighbouring prefectures (namely Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Gunma). Meanwhile, the import of all chilled or frozen game, meat and poultry, poultry eggs and all live, chilled or frozen aquatic products from the above five prefectures must be accompanied with a radiation certificate issued by the competent authority of Japan certifying that their radiation levels do not exceed the guideline levels of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex); otherwise, such food products cannot be imported into Hong Kong.

8. In fact, a number of countries have ceased their radiation monitoring on Japanese food one after another following the Fukushima nuclear accident while Hong Kong still maintains a risk-based approach in handling and conducting radiation tests on food products imported from Japan. Over the past ten years, the CFS has tested more than 750 000 samples of imported Japanese food products, all with radiation levels not exceeding the Codex guideline levels. The CFS will continue to conduct radiation testing of imported food from Japan following a risk-based approach under the routine Food Surveillance Programme to safeguard public health and food safety.

9. Regarding the plan recently announced by the Japanese authorities to discharge the wastewater from the FNPS into the ocean, we will keep on requesting the

Japanese authorities to provide us with the relevant information for conducting risk assessment. We will also work with departments concerned in formulating response plans to cater for different scenarios, which include, as the case may be, requiring more Japanese food imports to be accompanied by radiation certificates, increasing the tests on imported Japanese food and tightening import control on food products (including agricultural and fishery products) from related areas in Japan. .

Local Radiation Monitoring

10. As for Hong Kong waters, the Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) has been monitoring the environmental radiation level, including that of sea water samples collected in local waters of Hong Kong and announcing the results to the public. Although the wastewater planned to be discharged from the FNPS will be substantially diluted by seawater, the HKO will step up its radiation monitoring on Hong Kong waters as the situation requires. Separately, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department has been conducting regular sampling tests on cultured fish collected at fish culture zones in Hong Kong waters to keep in view the radiation levels of local catches.

The Next Step

11. The wastewater discharge plan of Fukushima involves a vast amount of wastewater with a high concentration of radioactive substances and the discharge activity is expected to last for years. We fully understand the concern and worries of the public and have conveyed clearly the message to the Japanese authorities that they should not discharge the wastewater from the FNPS into the ocean unilaterally without the consensus of the international community in order to avoid causing irreversible damage to the environment. .

12. As Japanese food is popular among Hong Kong people and Hong Kong is the largest export market for Japanese food products, we shall be particularly cautious in our work on the food safety front. The FHB will continue to maintain close communication with the Japanese authorities and work with the relevant departments to closely monitor the development of the matter, including the assessments made and opinions given by related international organisations on Japan's wastewater discharge plan. Local risk assessments will duly be carried out, and depending on the

circumstances, to consider whether adjustment to the surveillance on and import control arrangements for Japanese food products is necessary. We will also maintain liaison with the trade, aptly disseminate relevant information to them and listen to their views.

Advice Sought

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

Food and Health Bureau

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

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