

Press Releases

LCQ5: Plan of the Japanese Government to discharge nuclear wastewater into the sea

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 12):

Question:

The Japanese Government announced last month that it would start discharging nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the sea in two years' time. Some experts have pointed out that the nuclear wastewater containing radioactive substances will disperse across more than half of the Pacific Ocean within 57 days from the day of discharge, and spread over to all waters around the world in ten years' time. As a result, the marine ecosystem and fisheries industry around the world (including Hong Kong) will inevitably be affected. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the Deputy Prime Minister of Japan has indicated that the diluted nuclear wastewater is safe to drink, whether the Government has requested the Japanese authorities to provide the relevant information to ascertain if the nuclear wastewater is suitable for drinking;

(2) as the Government has indicated that it will request the Japanese authorities to provide information so that it may assess the food safety risks posed to Hong Kong by the discharge of nuclear wastewater, but the United States Food and Drug Administration published the Import Alert #99-33 soon after the occurrence of the nuclear incident in Japan, authorising the relevant departments to detain without examination food shipments imported to the United States from Japan, and such import alert is still in force, whether the Government has assessed if the approach to sit back and wait for the Japanese authorities' provision of information lags far behind the prevailing circumstances; and

(3) as it has been reported that last year, Hong Kong was the largest export destination for Japanese agricultural, forestry and fisheries products, whether, in light of the food safety risks posed by the discharge of nuclear wastewater, the Government will take measures to adjust the structures of the imported food and food industries and explore replacement food sources, so as to reduce reliance on Japanese food; of the measures it will take to alleviate the impacts of the discharged nuclear wastewater on the fisheries industry of Hong Kong?

Reply:

President,

The Japanese Government announced earlier the decision to discharge the wastewater generated in the cooling process of the reactors at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station into the ocean in about two years' time (i.e. 2023). The plan has aroused international and public concern. According to the announcement, the nuclear wastewater will be purified and diluted to meet

relevant international standards before discharge.

Since the wastewater contains various radionuclides, we understand that many organisations, fishery operators and members of the public are concerned that the discharge of wastewater from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station into the ocean would have serious impact on marine ecosystem, the food chain and food safety. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has expressed grave concern about the impact of the discharge plan on food safety, and has strongly requested the Japanese authorities to provide data on various aspects and information on control and surveillance, including the method and actual location of the wastewater discharge, the list and the concentration of the radionuclides in the wastewater, the frequency and volume of discharge, as well as the monitoring programme on the wastewater treatment and the surrounding environment. We have made it clear to the Japanese authorities that they shall provide all relevant information, formulate and promulgate a highly transparent and robust surveillance programme covering the measures and locations of monitoring at source, the radionuclides and types of food under surveillance, ways for release of surveillance results and contingency mechanisms, etc., and should not discharge the nuclear wastewater unilaterally without the consensus of the international community.

As regards the Import Alert #99-33 mentioned in the Member's question, as far as we understand, it was issued after the nuclear accident in Fukushima and has been updated from time to time by the Food and Drug Administration of the United States (US). The list of food products prohibited from import to the US as set out in the Alert (the US list) is basically the same as the list of food products prohibited from export from Japan. The US list is updated from time to time in accordance with the revision to the list of food products prohibited from export by the Japanese Government.

As for Hong Kong, the import control measures are extra control on top of the list of food products prohibited from export from Japan. Currently, apart from the food products that are prohibited from export by the Japanese authorities, all vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from Fukushima are prohibited from import to Hong Kong. Radiation certificate and exporter certificate are required for the import of all vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from the four neighbouring prefectures (i.e. Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Gunma). In addition, 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 is prohibited, unless the food products are accompanied by 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.

As compared to the US' food control list, Hong Kong's control measures on Japanese food products are, in fact, more stringent operationally, instead of lagging behind. For instance, vast majority of the fruits from Fukushima can be put on sale in Japan and the US currently. However for prudence sake, Hong Kong still prohibits their import. Moreover, chilled and frozen meat that can be put on sale in Fukushima and the neighbouring four prefectures must be accompanied by radiation certificate for import to Hong Kong, whereas such requirement is not necessary for import to the US. In fact, quite a number of countries have already ceased their radiation monitoring on Japanese food soon

after the Fukushima nuclear accident while Hong Kong adopts a risk-based approach in handling and conducting radiation tests on food products imported from Japan all along. Over the past ten years, more than 750 000 samples of Japanese food imports had been tested. We shall 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.

According to the figures of the Census and Statistics Department, the import of basic foodstuff from Japan amounts to about 1.3 per cent of the total food supply in Hong Kong. Depending on the circumstances, we will not rule out increasing the tests on Japanese food imports and tightening import control on food products from Fukushima and its neighbouring areas, while maintaining communication with the relevant trade. We also understand many fishery operators are concerned that the discharge of wastewater from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station into the ocean by the Japanese Government would have serious impacts on marine ecosystem, public confidence in seafood products and fishermen's livelihood. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department will keep in view the radiation levels of local catches, including conducting regular sampling tests on cultured fish collected at fish culture zones in Hong Kong waters. We will keep track of the development and render appropriate support to local fishermen when necessary.

We have relayed clearly to the Japanese authorities that they should not discharge the nuclear wastewater into the ocean unilaterally without the consensus of the international community so as to avoid bringing about irreversible impacts on the environment. The Japanese authorities shall disseminate all information relating to the nuclear wastewater discharge plan of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station to the international community and the public in a highly transparent manner. Or else, it will only lead to public's loss of confidence in the safety of the food imported from Japan. It was understood that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has proposed to set up a technical working group to follow up and monitor Japan's discharge of the nuclear wastewater. The China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs remarked that the IAEA has confirmed that it would invite experts from China to join the proposed technical working group. 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 the relevant Government departments as appropriate to determine the corresponding measures to safeguard public health.

Thank you, President.

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