

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

**Minutes of the Thirty-sixth Meeting
held at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, 5 July 2007
at Room 2005, 20/F, Murray Building, Garden Road, Central**

Professor YUEN Kwok-yung, SBS, JP (Chairman)

Professor HO Suk-ching, Sara

Professor HO Wing-shing, John

Mr. KWOK Chun-wah, Jimmy, MH, JP

Miss LAM Chui-lin

Ms LAM Wai-ling, Leona, JP

Mr. LAU Yiu-fai, Ronald

Mrs. Elizabeth MOK

Dr. WONG Sin-ying, Lillian

Dr. YUE Kwok-to

Mr. W H CHEUK

Permanent Secretary for Food and Health
(Food) (Acting)

Dr. MAK Sin-ping

Director of Food and Environmental
Hygiene (Acting)

Mr. Johnson TANG

Secretary of the Advisory Council on
Food and Environmental Hygiene

Absent with Apologies

Mr. FONG Wo, Felix, JP

Dr. LO Chi-kin, JP

Dr. LO King-shun

Dr. Veronica LEONG

Dr. TANG Shuk-ming, Winnie

Professor WU Shiu-sun, Rudolf

In Attendance

Food and Health Bureau

Ms Selina LEE

Senior Executive Officer (Food)

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Ms Alice LAU

Deputy Director (Environmental Hygiene)

Mr. Stanley NG

Senior Administrative Officer (Centre for Food Safety)¹

Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

Dr. K K LIU

Deputy Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (Acting)

Department of Health

Dr. Thomas TSANG

Head, Surveillance and Epidemiology Branch

Opening Remarks

The Chairman welcomed Members to the meeting.

Agenda Item 1 : Confirmation of the Minutes of the Last Meeting

2. Members confirmed the minutes of the last meeting without amendments.

Agenda Item 2 : Matters Arising from the Minutes of the Last Meeting

3. There was no matter arising from the minutes of last meeting.

Agenda Item 3 : Report of the work of the Centre for Food Safety (ACFEH Paper 7/2007)

4. Dr. MAK Sin-ping introduced the report. In response to a Member's

enquiry, Dr. MAK Sin-ping said that according to the agreement with the Mainland authorities for import via land, all fresh food items such as vegetables, fish and live poultry would be imported to Hong Kong through Man Kam To whilst other food items would come through Lok Ma Chau. Both the Mainland authorities and Hong Kong had set up inspection and other facilities at these border control points. The Shenzhen Bay Port was not used to import such food items to Hong Kong at present. As the control point at Man Kam To was constrained by space, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) would continue to liaise with the Mainland authorities to explore the possibility of using the Shenzhen Bay Port as one of the entry points for imported food items in the long run.

5. A Member appreciated the hard work of all staff of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) in the past year and suggested publicity on the achievements of CFS. She added that the report also provided useful information on food safety issues. If more interactive elements could be added to the report, teachers could make good use of it in showing children how to choose safe food. She asked if CFS would take any proactive measures in anticipation of problems, for example, the possible increase in the smuggling of meat due to the recent shortage of live pigs supply. CFS should warn smugglers of the consequences of their illegal actions. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that the report would be presented at the Legislative Council (LegCo) meeting next week and uploaded to the LegCo's website. CFS would refine the report for publication as a brochure which would also be uploaded to CFS's website for public access. CFS would consider producing more interactive publications for school teachers. As to illegal imports of meat, she added that FEHD would enhance enforcement action with the Customs and Excise Department against smuggling activities and would publicize successful operations as appropriate.

6. A Member also praised the report for its comprehensiveness. He said that from time to time, food test results were released by media or non-government bodies which had conducted tests on a specific food item. He would like to know if CFS could accelerate the food testing process and dissemination of information in order to provide timely response to these food test reports. As regards the food importer register, he doubted not many importers would register voluntarily. He enquired if there were measures to ensure compliance and what the consequence was if they did not register. Dr. MAK Sin-ping said that while CFS would not comment on individual results of

food tests conducted by other organizations, CFS would take follow up actions including taking samples from the concerned products for testing as appropriate. As to the mandatory registration with CFS for all food importers, a voluntary notification scheme would be launched first to allow the trade to familiarize with the requirement and enable the CFS to gain practical experience in designing and administering the mandatory scheme in future.

7. A Member asked how detector dogs could find out smuggled meat. As the new food safety legislation would empower CFS to arrange food recall and prohibit the importers from selling unsafe food, she would like to know the role of CFS and how CFS would deal with food incidents before the new food safety legislation was enacted. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that detector dogs with proper training could identify different smuggled goods, including meat. At present, though the CFS did not have the power to recall food, the trade had been co-operative in recent incidents in suspending the sale of suspected problematic food. Introduction of the new food safety legislation would enable CFS to better monitor the food recall arrangement.

8. A Member said that the report gave a comprehensive account of the achievements of the CFS in the past year. He suggested that a simplified version should be produced for the general public and invited the public to report to CFS in case of food incidents. He proposed that when the website with food importers' information was launched, promotion and publicity should be stepped up to inform the general public of the initiative. He considered it necessary to explore the use of Shenzhen Bay Port for importing food from Mainland to Hong Kong. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that CFS would continue to liaise with the Mainland authorities to review the arrangement at different border control points.

9. A Member agreed that the report was comprehensive and informative. He supported the CFS's tripartite collaboration concept in promoting food safety as a collaboration relationship among the Government, the food trade and the consumers. It was worthwhile to examine ways to include food safety topics in primary school curriculum because the schedule of primary school was not so tight. FEHD should further promote CFS's website and he suggested to develop a two-tiers website - the first tier for the general public and the second tier providing more in-depth information for the trade or other interested parties. He echoed the idea that the CFS should conduct follow-up tests on items tested

by other organisations, and announce the test results even if the results indicated that the food items were safe for consumption. As to control measures to be imposed over the import of food, he wondered if there was any restriction against bringing a small quantity of food into Hong Kong by individuals. He worried that there might be great impact caused even by a small quantity of problematic food. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that the CFS used different channels to promote CFS's website. Besides, the "GovHK 香港政府一站通" website would direct users to CFS's website if they were looking for information related to food safety. On food imports, she confirmed that it was illegal to bring meat or live poultry into Hong Kong without proper import document and health certificate. However, there was no legislation at present to control the import of many other food items. The situation would improve when the new food safety legislation came into operation and importation of high-risk food such as shellfish would be regulated.

10. A Member asked whether the food importers needed to declare if the imported food contained allergens under the proposed new food safety legislation. She believed the regulatory mechanism would be more effective if the relevant declaration was required. Otherwise, the CFS could only start to track down the problematic food after a food incident occurred. Dr. MAK Sin-ping said under the new food safety legislation, food importers and distributors needed to notify the CFS of some basic details about their business and to keep record of the movement of their food. Though food distributors might not be required to make the declaration, they needed to ensure that the imported food met the requirements of the relevant legislations in Hong Kong, including food labelling.

11. The Chairman supported that a declaration mechanism would be useful and the food importers could make online declaration. Dr. MAK Sin-ping agreed to consider the feasibility of a declaration mechanism in the future mandatory notification system.

12. The Chairman remarked that the report was very comprehensive and asked if annual report would be prepared in future. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that CFS would keep the Council informed of the progress of its work, and would consider the need of issuing regular reports in due course.

13. In response to the Chairman's enquiry about "oilfish" prosecution

cases, Dr. MAK Sin-ping told the meeting that 18 summonses had been issued against the particular trader.

Agenda Item 4 : Promotion of HACCP and ISO22000 to food premises (ACFEH Paper 8/2007)

14. Ms Alice LAU introduced the paper. A Member made a declaration of interest as he was the Chairman of the Hong Kong Food Council and one of the Management Committee members of the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency (HKQAA). The latter was one of the certifying bodies of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) and ISO22000. He appreciated the efforts made by FEHD to promote the adoption of HACCP and ISO22000 but only 30 licensed food premises were known to have adopted HACCP. This participation rate was very low as there were a total of more than 18 000 food business operators in Hong Kong. He queried if FEHD would promote the adoption among specific groups of food premises or to develop a self-regulatory mechanism which could be adopted by the majority of the trade. He told the meeting that HKQAA had arranged five seminars to introduce ISO22000 in the past two months with a total of over 400 participants. According to the feedback from participants and HKQAA's assessment, less than 10 food premises were able to fulfil ISO22000 requirements. Though the participants would like to improve their food safety practices, not many could afford the investment of nearly \$0.5 million for the adoption of ISO22000. If FEHD would like to encourage food premises to adopt self-regulatory measures, there were other choices, such as the Hygiene Control System. He urged FEHD to explore if there were any similar self-regulatory systems which were easier for small food premises to adopt. Besides, some of the participants of the seminars were actively considering the use of central kitchen. HKQAA had warned them of the higher risk of food poisoning if central kitchens were used.

15. Ms Alice LAU noted that many different food safety management systems had been developed and adopted in other countries. HACCP was more widely known to the food business industry in Hong Kong because it was amongst one of the most established systems. While FEHD would welcome the voluntary adoption of any management system or measure which could enhance food safety standards, it had to be satisfied that the systems or measures adopted were effective, internationally recognized and subject to regular review before granting any incentive. Otherwise, public confidence in food safety

would be undermined. She noted that the voluntary scheme to promote ISO22000 certification was launched at the end of 2006. At present, two food premises had been granted ISO22000 certification and nine applications were being processed. Since the incentive scheme had only been introduced for several months, FEHD would keep it under review. Should there be specific suggestions on the inclusion of other food safety management systems under the incentive scheme, FEHD would listen with an open mind and consider their merit. On the issue of using “central kitchens”, Ms LAU thanked the Member for sharing his observation. FEHD would watch out for any irregularities during inspection of food premises and enhance education of and information sharing with operators to ensure that any change in the mode of operation by food premises would not compromise food safety.

16. A Member said he would try to identify other self-regulatory mechanisms for FEHD’s consideration. He asked whether FEHD would consider granting sliding scale incentive for the food premises if they could meet the requirements of other self-regulatory mechanisms. Ms Alice LAU pointed out that under the present incentive scheme, the inspection frequency for ISO22000 accredited food premises and low-risk food premises not accredited was five months and 20 weeks respectively. There was little scope for introducing a sliding scale.

17. A Member supported the ultimate goal of encouraging food premises to achieve internationally recognized safety standards. However, in formulating the strategy to achieve the goal, the authority should take into account the limitations of local food premises in light of their limited capital, operators’ education level and the lack of knowledge about ISO requirements. Referring to the experience of her own institution in providing training to 40 food business operators each year for six years, she understood the operators’ constraints and proposed that some simple and pragmatic management concepts should be introduced for the trade to follow, instead of encouraging them to achieve international safety standards which would be well beyond their means.

18. The Chairman suggested that FEHD first set target for its policy and classify all food premises according to their capital. This information was necessary for FEHD to assess how many food premises could achieve ISO22000 and amongst these premises, how many of these were willing to obtain the ISO22000 certification as well as the reasons of their unwillingness to do so.

FEHD could then assess the effectiveness of the incentive scheme and fine-tune it.

19. In response, Dr. MAK Sin-ping said FEHD had no intention to impose ISO22000 requirements on all or any food premises, noting that there were cost implications and other constraints. FEHD acknowledged ISO22000 as an internationally recognized food-related standard and therefore provided some incentives for food premises that had attained such standards. FEHD would continue to provide training for food business operators to enhance their capability in ensuring food safety. She believed that operators who could not attain ISO22000 could still strive to improve their food safety practices. They could, for example, develop their own food safety plans using HACCP or some of the ISO22000 concepts.

20. A Member agreed that small food business operators in Hong Kong could hardly meet ISO standards which involved considerable human resources and investment. To encourage food businesses to adopt food safety management systems or measures, she suggested FEHD draw up new standards that were achievable for them.

21. A Member said that though there were difficulties for the small food business operators to obtain ISO22000 certification, FEHD should continue to encourage food premises to adopt ISO standards which were recognized internationally. He proposed some incentives be given to food business operators if they made efforts to do so such as employing trained food safety officers because this could improve food safety and hygiene standards.

22. A Member agreed that ISO22000 certification should continue to be promoted but she noted that other countries, unlike Hong Kong, had not provided any incentives even for food premises which obtained ISO22000 certification. She proposed more efforts should be made to educate the trade and the public of the importance of food safety. Ms Alice LAU confirmed the Member's observation that incentive was rarely if ever provided overseas for licensed food premises to adopt food safety management systems or certification. After all, food premises were expected to ensure food safety whether or not they adopt any recognized food safety management systems or obtain any certification. This explained why the "incentives" offered under the scheme administered by FEHD were rather modest.

23. A Member agreed that ISO22000 might be the ultimate goal for food premises but FEHD should explore other food safety management systems or measures that would better suit the needs of small food premises.

24. Ms Alice LAU noted there was consensus among members that food premises should be encouraged to enhance food safety and that the adoption of internationally recognized food safety management systems such as ISO22000 should continue to be promoted. However, since ISO22000 certification might not be achievable by all food premises, FEHD had no intention to make it a compulsory requirement for all. Instead, continued efforts would be made through education and information sharing to enhance the awareness of food business operators and promote voluntary adoption of food safety measures commensurate with the scale of operation of different food premises. She emphasized that ensuring food safety was the basic obligation of every food business operator.

25. A Member said it was reasonable for FEHD to provide incentives to food premises with ISO22000 certification because performance of these food premises would be monitored by the certifying bodies regularly. FEHD only needed to study how to promote its adoption.

26. In response to a Members's suggestion of classifying food premises into grades A, B and C in accordance with their capability in adopting good food safety practices for customers to make choices, Ms Alice LAU told the meeting that FEHD had considered the open categorization of food premises. However, some food premises had expressed reservation on the proposal during consultation. The proposed involvement of FEHD in "grading" food premises also did not sit well with its statutory roles as the licence issuing and regulatory authority.

Agenda Item 5 : Food Importer Register (ACFEH Paper 9/2007)

27. Mr. Stanley NG introduced the paper. In response to a Member's enquiry about packaged food, Dr. MAK Sin-ping said the pre-statutory voluntary notification scheme would be implemented by phases, and would cover high-risk food first. Other pre-packaged food would be covered at a later

stage.

Agenda Item 6 : Summary of Recent Food Incidents (ACFEH Paper 10/2007)

28. Dr. MAK Sin-ping introduced the paper. A Member appreciated the efforts made by CFS in the past year. She noted that the CFS's professional image had been well established and the general public had much confidence in its advice. Dr. MAK said the co-operation of the trade played a very important role in reducing the occurrence of food incidents.

29. A Member asked if the recent acidic rain in Guangzhou would affect vegetables imported to Hong Kong. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that CFS would continue to inspect imported vegetables under its routine surveillance programme and the main concern was pesticide residues. As most pesticides were water soluble, thorough washing of vegetables was an important and effective risk reduction measure. CFS would continue to disseminate relevant information to the public.

30. In response to the Chairman's enquiry, Dr. Thomas TSANG said that the number of reported cases with toxication symptom in the first half year was comparable to that in last year. There was no upsurge of cases in April and May. The timely announcement made by CFS had likely prevented illness through alerting the public on safe consumption of shellfish. The Chairman complimented CFS's good work.

31. A Member noted that the number of samples tested by CFS had increased. He asked if CFS could cater for the increase in workload. Dr. MAK Sin-ping replied that CFS would review the sampling strategy regularly to ensure effective deployment of resources. As a result of the increase in manpower in the Government Laboratory, test results could be available faster and new techniques be developed.

Agenda Item 7 : Any Other Business

32. There being no other business, the meeting adjourned at 12:20 p.m.

Secretariat
Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene
Food and Health Bureau
August 2007