

**For discussion  
on 7 February 2007**

**ACFEH Paper 68**

**Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene**

**Food Incidents Response and Management  
By the Centre for Food Safety**

**Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the surveillance and monitoring of food incidents as well as the actions taken by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) in response to these incidents.

**Background**

2. Over 95% of food consumed in Hong Kong is imported. With the vast variety of food being imported, it is impractical and impossible for every food item to be inspected and tested before being put into the Hong Kong market for sale. Instead, the CFS adopts a risk analysis framework on the monitoring and assessment of risks in food available for sale in Hong Kong. To facilitate early detection of food safety problems, regular monitoring of food safety trend via a food surveillance programme, daily surveillance of food incidents occurring locally and overseas, intelligence reports and prompt assessment are crucial elements of the process.

**Surveillance and Monitoring of Food Incidents**

3. The CFS has a food surveillance programme in place providing surveillance information to facilitate compliance check with existing food safety regulations in Hong Kong as well as surveying long-term trends of food safety. Food samples collected at import, wholesale and retail levels undergo microbiological, chemical and radioactivity tests under a risk-based approach. At present, priority is given to sampling of food with specific standards stipulated in the law, e.g. milk, cream and frozen confection, food connected with previous food poisoning or food incidents, those

manufactured by or sold in previously convicted food premises, and those under complaint by the public or of public concern.

4. On the other hand, the CFS monitors food incidents, both local and overseas, on a daily basis. The surveillance system has been put in place since 2000 and its scope and depth have been expanded recently. CFS checks daily media reports, the websites of various international and national food safety authorities, as well as media agencies to identify food incidents which may have implications to Hong Kong. These reports on food incidents, together with background scientific information on the food hazard involved, are distributed to concerned parties, including the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau. The potential impact on local public health is assessed by taking into account factors including the nature and level of hazard, potential exposure and local availability of the products.

5. The CFS has enhanced contact and communication with respective overseas food authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Commission through the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF). The CFS has participated in WHO's International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) for rapid global response to food incidents. With these established channels, the CFS receives notification and information of food incidents that occur overseas and which may have local impact.

6. As a large proportion of imported food is from the Mainland, the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau and the CFS have also established communication mechanism with the relevant Mainland authorities, including the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ), Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Commerce, local Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureaux, the Guangdong Provincial Government and the Shenzhen Municipal Government, to communicate on major food incidents and to deal with any food safety matters that may have cross-boundary implications.

7. On food poisoning, for example, as it is one of the statutory notifiable diseases, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) has a surveillance system in place to monitor the incidents and trend of the disease and outbreaks. Upon receipt of notification from the CHP, the CFS investigates outbreaks of food poisoning and foodborne diseases related to food premises or certain food products.

## **Response to Food Incidents with Potential Local Impact**

8. Taking into account the risk involved and the local situation, the CFS assesses the local impact and decides on the appropriate actions to be taken. The actions may include checking with exporting countries and/or relevant traders (importers/retailers) for more information; collecting samples for testing; and in case of significant impact, issuing press release and food alert and disseminating information through the electronic system to provide the public and trade with relevant information; alerting DH and health professionals; suspending import if applicable; and, if required, coordinating food recalls.

9. In case of food poisoning outbreaks and foodborne diseases related to food premises or certain food products, the CFS would work in collaboration with the CHP and investigate into the related food premises or products; trace the source of incriminated food; rectify irregularities; provide education to food handlers; and, if indicated, carry out more stringent control measures including stop of sale of certain high risk food, closure of food premises and recall of food.

10. The decision on the actions will be fed back to stakeholders within the government as appropriate. At times, 'line-to-take' would be prepared and circulated to all relevant officers within the government to ensure consistency in communications. The CFS would keep on close monitoring of the development with appropriate follow-up actions and regular updates.

## **Communication with Stakeholders and the Public on Food Incidents**

11. Effective communication with relevant stakeholders including international authorities, overseas food authorities, exporting countries, local authorities (such as other government departments), trade, media and the public during a food incident or food safety crisis is crucial to the effective implementation of management decisions and, not the least, to prevent the public from panic.

12. Factors to be taken into consideration in deciding whether, or when there should be announcements for the public include whether there is

immediate health hazard and whether there is major public concern.

13. Once it is decided that public announcement is to be made, the CFS has in place a variety of channels for quick and timely communication with the stakeholders, e.g. press release, press conference, media briefings, educational and informative materials such as Food Safety Focus, Food Alerts, handbills, telephone hotline, messages through the Food Safety Electronic Information Delivery System and CFS website, to keep the trade and public updated of the situation promptly.

### **International Experience**

14. Many developed countries have adopted the risk-based approach and acted upon intelligence / information for food incidents. Experts of overseas food authorities, including Canada and the UK, have indicated that prevention of food incidents require the trade and the Government to work in partnership. Sharing of intelligence and information among food authorities worldwide and raising public awareness are important in the effective management of food incidents. It is also noted that there are gaps between the public and the Administration. For instance, priorities for risk management based on science do not always match consumer perceptions of what the priorities should be. There are also gaps between perceived and actual risks. Foods with detectable chemical residues were often perceived by the public and the media as poisonous and a failure in food safety control, without giving full consideration to the agricultural, husbandry or manufacturing practices, the actual risks involved and the international situation.

### **Enhancement of Food Surveillance and Risk Communication**

15. It can be seen from the above that there are established procedures and channels to ensure effective communication within the Government and between the CFS and the stakeholders. However, taking into account the international experience and the recent local food incidents, the CFS will enhance its efforts in two aspects. Firstly, the CFS is reviewing its food surveillance strategy with a view to develop a programme which is more proactive in identifying potential food safety issues, such as undertaking more project-based surveillance focusing on particular types of food/harmful

substances and scheduling more tests on seasonal food throughout different time of the year, e.g. traditional food before Chinese New Year, hot pot ingredients before winter, etc. Secondly, the CFS will also strive to be more proactive in providing the public with information on food incidents. While both risk level and level of public concern have always been taken into account in providing information to the public, the weight attached to the level of public concern will be increased; and when public health is involved, or at stake, relevant information will be announced even when information is incomplete and fragmented. The CFS will continue to evaluate and monitor its internal communications, communications with the HWFB and communications with stakeholders, for further improvements.

### **Advice sought**

16. Members are invited to note and comment on the measures taken by the CFS on handling food incidents and the enhancement in food surveillance and risk communication programme to be adopted by the CFS.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau  
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department  
Centre for Food Safety  
February 2007**