

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

Summary of Recent Food Incidents

1. Pesticide residues in vegetables and fruits

- A local green group issued a statement to demand for early introduction of a comprehensive food safety law to regulate the maximum residue limits (MRLs) of pesticide residues in imported vegetables and fruits.
- The Administration responded by highlighting that it was drafting a comprehensive food safety law to gradually regulate food items having a higher food safety risk or of wide public concern with priority given to farmed aquatic products, vegetables and fruits. The food safety law would also include imposing a registration scheme on food importers and distributors, empowering the Administration to mandatory recall problematic food and requiring health certificates for the import of certain food items. The Administration also stated that it would strive to work out a clearer legal framework to regulate MRLs of pesticide residues in vegetable and fruits in six months.
- The green group also conducted a study and found that pesticide residues were detected in four samples of vegetables collected from local markets. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) had studied the results. Based on the reported levels of pesticides, there is unlikely to be health concern to consumers upon normal consumption of the vegetables. CFS will continue to monitor pesticide residues in vegetables at import, wholesale and retail levels of the market through its food surveillance programme.
- According to the agreement between the Mainland and Hong Kong, all vegetables supplied by the Mainland must come from some 190 registered farms and purchasing stations located at different provinces. Consignments of vegetables can only be exported to Hong Kong after examination by the relevant Mainland entry-exit inspection and quarantine bureaux. Vehicles transporting the vegetables, which should be accompanied by monitoring card and pesticide declaration

certificate issued by the Mainland authorities, are required to enter Hong Kong through Man Kam To. However, as there is no legislation governing the importation of vegetables, the CFS has no legal power to demand the vegetable-carrying vehicles to enter Man Kam To Food Control Office of the Centre. The CFS would take samples for testing at the import, wholesale and retail levels. Unsatisfactory but low levels of the pesticide methamidophos had been detected among some 22 000 vegetable samples collected by the CFS in 2006.

- To further enhance the safety of vegetables supplied to Hong Kong, the Mainland inspection and quarantine authorities have implemented a new inspection system since 1 April 2007. Under the new system, vegetables from farms and purchasing stations not meeting the necessary requirements are not allowed to export vegetables to Hong Kong. Moreover, packaging for transport and sale of vegetables supplied to Hong Kong should be marked with the name and address of the planting farms, registration number, product name and manufacturing date. Mainland inspection and quarantine authorities will supervise, mark the packaging process and seal the consignments for transporting to Hong Kong.

2. Heavy Metal in Dried Shredded Squid and Dried Fish

- The Consumer Council published on 16 April 2007 a survey on dried meat products, dried shredded squid (魷魚絲) and dried fish (魚乾). All the 23 dried squid and dried fish samples were found to contain arsenic at levels ranging from 1.1 to 35.3 mg/kg.
- The Consumer Council stated in their report that in determining whether a dried sample has exceeded the legal limits, the water content of the product in its natural state has to be taken into account. As an established practice, they have thus passed the results to the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) for assessment and follow up.
- Under the Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) Regulations, Cap. 132 sub. leg. V, the maximum permitted level of arsenic in fish and fish products is 6 mg/kg and that for shellfish and shellfish products is 10 mg/kg.
- As the concerned squid and fish products have undergone a process of drying, the levels of contaminants would have been concentrated

during the drying process. The degree of dehydration needs to be taken into consideration to see whether the levels of heavy metal(s) detected in the samples have exceeded the legal limits. According to the results provided by the Consumer Council, all of the samples are in compliance with the Regulations after taking into consideration the degree of dehydration.

- Heavy metals may be found in food naturally due to environmental contamination. Its presence in food does not necessarily imply abuse in the manufacturing process.
- The health effect of arsenic is dependent on its level in food, the quantity consumed and the duration of consumption. The Consumer Council reported that consumption of three packages (90g each) of the sample detected with 35.3mg/kg total arsenic (assuming 10% of it was inorganic) may already have exceeded the provisional tolerable weekly intake (PTWI), a safety reference level established by international authority. The derivation of PTWI stressed on lifetime exposure. Therefore, occasional excursion above the PTWI would not pose any health implications provided that the average intake over long period does not exceed the PTWI.
- Based on CFS's risk assessment study and the consumption pattern for dried squid, adverse effects due to inorganic arsenic upon usual consumption of the concerned dried squid samples is not expected. CFS is, however, concerned with the high levels of arsenic detected in some dried squid samples of the Consumer Council's study and is following up on the issue and taking further samples for analysis.
- CFS will continue to collaborate with the Consumer Council in promoting food safety in Hong Kong.

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