

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

FHB(FE)075

(Question Serial No. 0645)

Head: (49) Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
Subhead (No. & title): (000) Operational expenses
Programme: (1) Food Safety and Public Health
Controlling Officer: Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (Miss Vivian LAU)
Director of Bureau: Secretary for Food and Health
This question originates from: Estimates on Expenditure Volume I Page 248 (if applicable)

Question (Member Question No. 8):

Information shows that the expenditure on food safety and public health will increase by 5.6% in the coming year. In this connection, please advise on the following:

- 1) the amount of resources to be allocated for exercising import control on high-risk food, as well as the places of origin and the types of food to be covered in such control;
- 2) with regard to the testing of high-risk food imported from places such as Japan, China and Taiwan, whether resources will be allocated for procuring equipment and additional manpower be deployed;
- 3) whether financial provision will be earmarked for conducting a study with a view to adopting measures similar to those implemented overseas (e.g. in South Korea) to prohibit the import of agricultural products from radiation-contaminated areas in Japan so as to allay public concerns. If yes, the plans; if not, the reason(s); and
- 4) given the difference in the conception of food labelling and content of high-risk food among the public, whether the expenditure on publicity and public education on this front will be increased. If yes, the plans; if not, the reason(s).

Asked by: Hon. CHAN Han-pan

Reply:

- 1) At present, high-risk food including game, meat, poultry, milk and frozen confections imported from outside Hong Kong is subject to import control. Apart from that, in response to the Fukushima nuclear power plant incident in Japan on 11 March 2011, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene made a food safety order prohibiting the import of certain fresh produce and milk products (note 1) from five prefectures (Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi, Gunma, and Chiba) of Japan. The order is still effective.

The expenditure of exercising import control on high-risk food will be absorbed within existing resources for safeguarding food safety in general and cannot be separately identified.

- 2) The Administration has allocated sufficient resources to procure the instruments required for carrying out various food tests. The Administration will also flexibly deploy its manpower to meet the operational needs and service demand, including import control on high-risk food.
- 3) Since the nuclear power plant incident in Fukushima, Japan in March 2011, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has adopted a risk-based approach in formulating strategies to monitor food imports from Japan.

CFS will continue to stay alert to the situation of the Fukushima nuclear power plant and collect food samples for radiation testing, with reference to the test results of the Japanese authority and local surveillance. CFS will also keep track of the latest measures taken by other countries/places against food products imported from Japan, and recommendations made by international agencies including the World Health Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the issue. CFS will adjust the surveillance measures on Japanese food imports as necessary to ensure food safety and protect public health.

In response to the nuclear power plant incident, CFS has promptly adopted the “Guideline Levels for Radionuclides in Foods Contaminated Following a Nuclear or Radiological Emergency” (Guideline Levels) laid down by the Codex Alimentarius Commission for testing the radiation levels of every consignment of food products imported from Japan to ensure food safety. This testing strategy has been in force since then. On 23 March 2011, three samples of vegetables imported from the Chiba prefecture were detected with radioactive substances at levels exceeding the Guideline Levels. To protect public health, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene issued an order on the following day (i.e. 24 March 2011) to prohibit the import of certain fresh produce and milk products from five prefectures of Japan. The order remains in force today.

Taking into account the latest experts’ opinions of IAEA and the above-mentioned mechanism to monitor and assess import control measures imposed by other countries/places against food products imported from Japan, CFS considers the existing control measures adequate for the protection of public health and there is no plan to conduct a separate study to review the control strategy.

- 4) Public education and publicity (PE&P) on food labelling and high-risk food is part and parcel of the CFS’ overall PE&P efforts and the relevant expenditure cannot be separately identified. CFS adopts a risk-based approach in setting out priorities of its PE&P programmes, having regard to food incidents and results of food surveillance, amongst other considerations, and deploys resources flexibly in accordance with such priorities.

Note 1: The food safety order applies to:

- (a) all vegetables and fruits;
- (b) all milk, milk beverages and milk powder; and
- (c) all chilled or frozen game, meat and poultry, all poultry eggs and all live, chilled or frozen aquatic products, unless accompanied by a certificate issued by the competent authority of Japan certifying that the radiation levels do not exceed the guideline levels laid down by Codex.