

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

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(Question Serial No. 4350)

Head: (49) Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
Subhead (No. & title): (-) Not Specified
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 250 (if applicable)

Question (Member Question No. 1.19):

In connection with genetically modified (GM) food, please advise on the following:

- (a) Since the implementation of the Voluntary Labelling of Genetically Modified Food Scheme, the number of participating traders every year and the percentage they account for.
- (b) Has the Administration reviewed the effectiveness of the existing Voluntary Labelling of Genetically Modified Food Scheme? If yes, what are the details and the plan?
- (c) Has the Administration conducted any research on the risk and regulation of GM food? If yes, please advise on the expenditure and manpower involved and list the research projects.
- (d) Has the Administration constantly kept abreast of the international research, discussion and initiatives on GM food regulation? If yes, what are the expenditure and manpower involved? Will the Administration review and update Hong Kong's existing regulatory measures and standards accordingly and what is the specific plan?
- (e) The Bureau states that it will follow up on the proposals to introduce a pre-market safety assessment scheme for GM food. What are the expenditure and manpower involved, details and specific plan?
- (f) The expenditure and manpower involved in introducing GM food related information to the public and the traders for the past five years and the estimate for 2014-15.

Asked by: Hon. LEUNG, Kenneth

Reply:

- (a) The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) introduced a voluntary genetically-modified (GM) food labelling scheme by issuing the "Guidelines on Voluntary Labelling of Genetically Modified Food" (the Guidelines) in 2006. The Guidelines set out the principles underlying the recommended labelling approaches for GM food. Traders are encouraged to adopt the Guidelines. As the labelling scheme is voluntary in nature, we do not have the number of participating traders.
- (b) The Administration conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the voluntary labelling scheme and reported the results to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene of the Legislative Council in 2008. The study revealed that over 60% of the traders interviewed through a questionnaire were aware of the Guidelines. The questionnaires returned also indicated that the main reasons for some traders not adopting the voluntary labelling scheme were the absence of legal requirements, increase in production cost, and limited knowledge of GM food labelling. The market survey carried

out during the study showed that of over 1 200 prepackaged food products covered, 14 food samples carried negative GM labels and all these labels from contactable traders were substantiated by documentation. In addition, 46 samples of prepackaged food containing crops with GM counterparts most commonly used in food (i.e. corn and soya bean) were tested for GM content. Only one sample was found to contain more than 5% of GM material (the threshold value for positive labelling), and there was no GM food label on the food sample concerned. The findings from the evaluation exercise illustrated that there was no pressing need for mandatory labelling, as measured by the level of use of GM material in the samples.

In 2013, CFS and the Consumer Council conducted a joint study on GM ingredients in corn and corn-based products. 11 out of 49 samples surveyed did not follow the Guidelines. Among these 11 samples, five samples were found to contain GM corn contents exceeding the threshold value (5%) without carrying any positive GM labelling; six samples were found to carry negative labelling without substantiating documentation and/or carrying negative labelling for the products as a whole without specifying which ingredient(s) was/were derived from non-GM source. In response to these findings, CFS has issued advisory letters to remind relevant traders to follow the Guidelines.

- (c) The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department commissioned a consultancy in April 2002 to conduct a regulatory impact assessment on GM food labelling and the study was completed in early 2003. The total contract value of the project was \$748,300.
- (d) The Administration has kept in view international developments on the regulatory control on GM food. It is noted that according to the World Health Organisation, GM food currently traded on the international market are not likely, nor have been shown, to present risks for human health, and there is a lack of international consensus on GM food labelling. The work is undertaken by CFS' existing staff and the expenditure cannot be separately identified.
- (e) To provide a mechanism to further enhance the food safety control over GM food and provide the legal basis for preventing unauthorised GM products from entering the local market, the Administration is considering regulating GM food by introducing a mandatory pre-market safety assessment scheme (PMSAS) in Hong Kong. The Administration will embark on a public consultation before deciding on the details of PMSAS and its implementation timetable. The work will be undertaken by existing manpower and the expenditure cannot be separately identified.
- (f) Education on GM food is part and parcel of CFS' food safety and nutritional education efforts. The CFS will continue to enhance work in this respect through various channels including the Trade Consultation Forum, CFS website, newsletters, roving exhibitions and talks. The expenditure of these activities will be absorbed within existing resources for safeguarding food safety in general and cannot be separately identified.