

**CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY**

**FHB(FE)263**

**(Question Serial No. 4778)**

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. 181):

It is stated that the Department will “follow up on the proposals to introduce a mandatory pre-market safety assessment scheme for genetically modified food”. In this connection, please provide information on the following:

1. the details of the work and the estimated expenditure to be involved;
2. whether the Department has conducted tests on food products for sale on the market for genetically modified (GM) materials in the past; if yes, the test results; if not, the reason(s);
3. whether the Department will consider conducting tests on GM materials in food for sale on the market and publishing the test results for public information on a regular basis; if yes, the details and the estimated expenditure to be involved; if not, the reason(s);
4. whether there were government-funded studies on GM food conducted by non-government organisations in the past; if yes, the details including the year of study, the name of organisation, the amount of funding provided and the subject of study; and
5. whether the Department will consider implementing a mandatory GM food labelling system; if yes, the details and the estimated expenditure to be involved; if not, the reason(s).

Asked by: Hon. WONG Kwok-hing

Reply:

1. To provide a mechanism to further enhance the food safety control over genetically modified (GM) food and provide the legal basis for preventing unauthorised GM products from entering the local market, the Government is considering regulating GM food by introducing a mandatory pre-market safety assessment scheme (PMSAS) in Hong Kong. Under the proposed scheme, a GM food developer who intends to place a GM food on the local market would be required to submit an application together with the necessary supporting documentation to Centre for Food Safety (CFS) for evaluation. CFS will determine whether the GM food developer has adequately addressed the safety issues based on Codex principles and guidelines. Food which consists of, or is derived from, GM microorganisms, plants and animals, must pass the safety assessment before it may be sold in Hong Kong. The Administration will embark on a public consultation before deciding on the details of PMSAS and its implementation timetable. The concerned expenditure will be absorbed by existing resources.

2. As part of the evaluation on the effectiveness of the voluntary labelling scheme in Hong Kong, CFS conducted a study related to GM ingredients in foods available on the local market and reported to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene of the Legislative Council in 2008. In that study, 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 and one sample was found to contain more than 5% (the threshold value for positive labelling) of GM material. In 2013, CFS and the Consumer Council conducted a joint study on GM ingredients in corn and corn-based products, to assess whether these products followed the recommendations set out in the “Guidelines on Voluntary Labelling of GM Food”. Among the 49 samples taken, corn DNA was detected in 37 samples, and among them, 12 samples were detected with GM corn DNA. Five samples were found to contain more than 5% GM corn contents and all of them were snack products imported from the United States.
3. 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. As such, CFS has not conducted separate food safety tests for GM food. GM food is treated like any other food and is covered in the regular Food Surveillance Programme conducted by CFS. The need for conducting separate regular tests on GM materials in food for sale in Hong Kong would be considered in light of any future regulatory regime that may be introduced.
4. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has not funded any non-governmental organisations to conduct a study on GM food.
5. In response to public concern on GM food, the Administration conducted a public consultation on GM Food labelling in 2001 and a regulatory impact assessment (RIA) in April 2002. The RIA revealed certain issues that need to be addressed when implementing a mandatory GM food labelling scheme in Hong Kong, e.g. increasing operational cost of the trade with a greater impact on the small and medium-sized enterprises, and the lack of international consensus on GM food labelling. Taking into account the findings of the RIA and the lack of strong justification for the labelling of GM food on food safety grounds, the Administration considered that encouraging the trade to adopt a voluntary labelling system would be a practical alternative to a mandatory labelling system. Many of the considerations derived from the RIA conducted in 2002 are still relevant. Most of the GM food available in the Hong Kong market are imported, and not all food exporting economies require mandatory labelling of GM food, and even for the ones that do, the labelling requirements vary. It would be costly and difficult for Hong Kong food importers to come up with labels for all GM ingredients in respect of GM food coming from all over the world in order to comply with Hong Kong’s labelling requirement if one were to be introduced on a mandatory basis. While a mandatory GM food labelling system could address consumers’ demand for more product information and facilitate the making of informed choices by consumers, it may not necessarily be the most useful tool to ensure the safety of GM food.