

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

FHB(FE)402

(Question Serial No. 5604)

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

Question:

Will the Government inform the Committee:

- (1) of the respective numbers and percentages, in each of the past 5 years, of vegetable importers, wholesalers and retailers engaged in the trading of directly distributed vegetables?
- (2) of the respective quantities and percentages of directly distributed vegetables among the various kinds of vegetables imported to Hong Kong (including winter vegetables, summer vegetables, leafy vegetables, gourds, fruits, roots and rhizomes, beans, herbs, mushroom and others) in each of the past 5 years?
- (3) in each of the past 5 years, of (i) the number of vegetable samples taken by the Department for inspection and testing, (ii) the number of unsatisfactory samples (as well as the reasons for the unsatisfactory result), and (iii) the number of cases of poisoning due to consumption of vegetables with excessive pesticide residues, and among them, the respective numbers related to directly distributed vegetables and their percentages in the relevant totals?
- (4) whether the Department has assessed if directly distributed vegetables are suitable for consumption; if so, the details; if not, the reason(s). What are the measures in place to address public concerns over the safety of consumption of directly distributed vegetables?
- (5) whether the Department has studied if the prevalence of directly distributed vegetables in the market reveals that there are loopholes in the Food Surveillance Programme (FSP)? If it has done so and the outcome is in the affirmative, will the Department take measures to include directly distributed vegetables in the FSP, e.g. requiring that all vegetables supplied by the Mainland to Hong Kong must be distributed through the Vegetable Marketing Organization? If so, what are the details; if not, what is/are the reason(s)?

Asked by: Hon KWOK Ka-ki (LegCo internal reference no.: 202)

Reply:

Hong Kong is a free market. All along, imported vegetables may either be distributed through wholesale markets (including the wholesale markets operated by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), the Cheung Sha Wan Vegetable Marketing Organization (VMO) or other private wholesalers) or sold directly at retail outlets (direct sale). According to the information from the Census and Statistics Department, there were about 850 000 tonnes of imported vegetables in 2018. According to the information from AFCD, about 340 000 tonnes of vegetables were transacted through the wholesale markets operated by AFCD and the VMO in that year.

Whether vegetables are distributed through wholesalers is not relevant to safeguarding food safety. Wholesale markets primarily provide a trading platform for importers and retailers to facilitate business. All vegetables sold in Hong Kong for human consumption, regardless of whether the vegetables are distributed through the wholesale markets operated by AFCD or the VMO, are subject to local food safety regulatory mechanism.

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department takes samples of vegetables and their products at the import, wholesale and retail levels along a risk-based approach under its Food Surveillance Programme to safeguard food safety, regardless of whether the vegetables are distributed through wholesalers or are for direct sale. The numbers of samples of vegetables and their products taken for testing and the number of unsatisfactory samples from 2014 to 2018 are as follows –

| Calendar year | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | Total |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Number of samples taken | 21 694 | 24 537 | 24 462 | 23 677 | 23 952 | 118 322 |
| Number of unsatisfactory samples | 40 | 97 | 65 | 26 | 44 | 272 |

The overall satisfactory rate of vegetables and their products in the past 5 years was 99.8%. The unsatisfactory samples were detected to have pesticide residues, preservatives or metallic contamination, etc. exceeding the relevant food safety standards. There was no food poisoning case caused by consuming foods with excessive pesticide residues during the same period of time.

CFS does not have statistics on the quantities and distribution channels of fresh imported vegetables by food traders.

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