

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

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(Question Serial No. 1529)

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 (Ms Irene YOUNG)

Director of Bureau: Secretary for Environment and Ecology

Question:

Under Matters Requiring Special Attention in 2023-24, it is stated that the Department will continue to review and update local food safety standards, guidelines and regulatory arrangements. In this connection, please advise this Committee of the following:

- (1) What is the progress of the review of the standards, guidelines and regulatory arrangements for veterinary drug residues and additives in food so far? Any updates have been made? If yes, what are the details?
- (2) How many food samples were taken by the Department for testing of veterinary drug residues and additives in each of the past 3 years? Were there any cases of non-compliance found? If yes, please provide the details.
- (3) What specific measures were in place in 2022-23 to ensure food safety at the import, wholesale and retail levels and what was the effectiveness of such measures? Will new measures be introduced to step up food surveillance in 2023-24? If yes, what are the details and estimated expenditure? If no, what is/are the reason(s)?

Asked by: Hon TANG Ka-piu (LegCo internal reference no.: 28)

Reply:

- (1) One of the policy initiatives in the Chief Executive's 2022 Policy Address is to review and update in phases the legislation relating to additives in food to further enhance food safety. The first phase of the review covers the standards for preservatives and antioxidants under the Preservatives in Food Regulation (Cap. 132BD). We plan to brief the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on the proposed amendments in the second quarter of 2023 and then conduct a public consultation exercise.

For the review of the standards for veterinary drug residues in food, we plan to brief the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene in the second half of 2023.

- (2) The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department implements the Food Surveillance Programme (FSP) to take food samples at the import, wholesale and retail levels under a risk-based principle for microbiological, chemical and radiological testing on an ongoing basis. In the past 3 years (i.e. 2020 to 2022), CFS tested more than 35 000 food samples for veterinary drug residues and food additives. The test results of all samples, except for 116, were satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.7%. Of the unsatisfactory samples, 82 samples and 34 samples were detected with preservatives/antioxidants and veterinary drug residues exceeding the relevant limits respectively. CFS has taken appropriate follow-up actions on these cases, including tracing the sources, informing the relevant authorities of the places of origin, instructing vendors to stop selling the food, recalling and disposing of the implicated food, and making public announcements.
- (3) At the import level, CFS has established a system of recognition of issuing entity with authorities of exporting countries/places, under which importers of higher-risk foods (e.g. meat, poultry and eggs) are required to provide health certificates issued by the relevant issuing entities as proof of compliance with the food safety requirements of Hong Kong. A regular communication mechanism is also in place for exchange of information relating to food safety between CFS and the authorities of exporting countries/places.

Moreover, to ensure food safety, CFS has been closely monitoring food surveillance results, actively following food incidents in Hong Kong and other places and the relevant risk analyses, and maintaining regular review of the implementation of the FSP. In 2022, about 63 800 food samples were taken for routine and targeted surveillance, of which about 32 400, 3 500 and 27 900 samples were collected at the import, wholesale and retail levels respectively. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.8%, indicating that food safety has been maintained at a high standard in Hong Kong.

In 2023-24, CFS will implement the following measures to step up food surveillance:

- (i) Successive completion of CFS's new IT systems: The Food Trader Portal and the Food Incident Management System commenced operation in late 2019 and March 2022 respectively, while the new Food Import and Export Control System and Food Surveillance System were rolled out in November 2022 and January 2023 respectively. CFS will continue to enhance the interface among these systems to create a comprehensive information network, thereby increasing its capability in food import control, surveillance and traceability.
- (ii) Enhanced surveillance of online food sales: The number of online food samples to be taken by CFS for testing will increase to over 7 000 per year, up from 1 500 in 2015.
- (iii) Targeted surveillance of nutrition labels: Nutrition labels are a tool informing consumers about the nutrition content of food. CFS will step up the targeted surveillance by increasing the number of samples to be taken for testing from 80 in 2022 to 120, with a view to checking the compliance with legal requirements and the accuracy of nutrition labels of food items on the market.

- (iv) The Harmful Substances in Food (Amendment) Regulation (Amendment Regulation) will come into force in phases on 1 June 2023 and 1 December 2023. The number of relevant food samples to be taken for testing by CFS will increase to 1 500. More than 400 will be tested for the harmful substances newly specified in the Amendment Regulation, e.g. vomitoxin, patulin, benzo[a]pyrene, glycidyl fatty acid esters, 3-monochloropropane-1,2-diol and partially hydrogenated oil, in order to monitor the compliance with the relevant standards therein.
- (v) In response to the wastewater discharge plan of Japan, CFS has planned to increase the radiological tests on imported Japanese food products, particularly those on aquatic products and targeted testing of specific radioactive substances.

As regards the measures mentioned in item (i), the cost of the interface among the systems has been covered by the expenditure on the respective system development projects. CFS does not have a separate breakdown of the expenditure on the system interface in 2023-24. For the measures mentioned in items (ii) to (v), staff responsible for undertaking the relevant work are also tasked with other duties of safeguarding food safety. CFS does not have a separate breakdown of the resources required for food surveillance.

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