

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

**Enhancement of the Information Technology Systems
of the Centre for Food Safety**

Purpose

This paper briefs members on the latest progress in enhancing the information technology (IT) systems of the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department.

Enhancement of the IT Systems of the CFS

2. The existing IT systems of the CFS were developed by contractors at different times to meet different needs. As the organisation and structure of the data vary from one system to another, the various systems cannot be completely integrated to facilitate retrieval and analysis of data. In view of this, the CFS reviewed comprehensively its IT systems at the end of 2017 and made plans to revamp the systems to increase its efficiency, reinforce its capability in food import control and surveillance, improve its effectiveness of food incident management and enhance its food traceability. The CFS is currently developing and setting up/updating in stages its five IT systems, namely the Food Trader Portal (FTP), the Food Import and Export Control System (FIECS), the Food Incident Management System (FIMS), the Food Surveillance System (FSS) and the CFS Food Coding System (FCS), in order of priorities.

Food Trader Portal

3. The CFS launched the trader registration module under the first phase of the FTP on 23 December 2019 by introducing an online registration service for food traders to submit applications for registration as food importers or distributors, renewal of registration and update of trader information by electronic means. Since the commencement of the service, more than 1 800

food importers or distributors have successfully completed registration through the FTP as at the end of October 2020. With each trader registration being valid for three years, more traders are expected to register through the FTP when their current registrations need to be renewed.

4. On 30 March 2020, the electronic application module for meat, poultry and game was rolled out by the CFS to facilitate application for import licences for meat and poultry and import permissions for meat, poultry and game by food importers. Applicants are no longer required to send staff to submit application forms to and obtain import licences or import permissions from the CFS in person. Through access to the online system, they can also check their application status and records of past applications, as well as the lists of approved slaughtering plants and processing plants eligible for export in different places and information on the list of foods suspended from import. The use of the FTP is voluntary. The first phase of service is mainly aimed at importers and distributors of meat, poultry and game. Since the introduction of the service, more than 500 food importers have applied online for import licences or import permissions as at the end of October 2020. At present, about 91% of applications for import licences and about 93% of applications for import permissions are submitted and granted through the FTP, i.e. a large part of the related work has ceased to be performed in paper form.

5. In tandem with the launch of the online application platform, the Import Licensing Office of the CFS has increased its working days from five days to seven days a week since 30 March 2020, with operation hours extended to 9:00 pm from Monday to Friday, for expeditious handling of online applications for import licences. The time required for processing an online application for an import licence for the import of meat and poultry by air as well as import of chilled meat and poultry by land has generally been shortened to a few hours.

6. On 28 September 2020, new online services were launched which further expand the functions of FTP by enabling importers of milk and frozen confections to submit electronic applications for import permission and report the arrival of their consignments online. The CFS is planning to further enhance the services of FTP by stages to cover applications for the importation of eggs and consignment reporting and clearance for all food types subject to import control by the second quarter of 2021.

Other Major IT Systems

7. The CFS is also preparing to develop the FIECS for supporting the workflow of food import control. Apart from supporting the vetting of applications for import permissions and import licences, the FIECS can also record details such as consignment arrival, document checks, physical inspections and sampling, and issue release letters and other notices. The FIECS will be equipped with automated functions, such as selecting food consignments for physical inspection, verifying the status of the slaughtering or processing plants declared in an import licence application, cross-checking the information submitted in an import licence application against the information on import suspensions, etc. The use of computer system to replace the manual process of data input and verification will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of food import control. The FIECS is expected to be completed by the end of 2022.

8. The FIMS is another new system to be established by the CFS to strengthen its effectiveness in recording and tracing the actions taken by relevant units of the CFS in food incidents, so as to enhance monitoring of the progress of follow-up actions including food recalls. The FIMS is equipped with a knowledge base on risk assessments and related reference materials for effective and accurate retrieval of past records to enable quick access to information by the CFS when similar food incidents occur in future. Furthermore, the FIMS can promptly trace the sources of problematic foods to facilitate the CFS to issue clear guidelines to food importers and distributors in the first instance for effective tracing, interception and recall of the foods concerned, as well as to devise follow-up actions. The FIMS is expected to be completed by the end of 2021.

9. In addition, the CFS is developing the FCS for use in its IT systems, under which different food products will be assigned a code to enable recording, retrieval and analysis of food data in relevant IT systems, so as to reinforce its capability in risk assessment and food traceability. The FCS is expected to be completed by the third quarter of 2021.

10. Other than establishing new IT systems, the CFS will also revamp the existing FSS to step up food surveillance. The revamp is expected to be

completed by the end of 2022. A database of retail stores will be set up under the FSS to improve the present approach of selecting and collecting food samples for surveillance by the CFS. The FSS will also interface with the FIECS, such that if imported food requiring the collection of samples for surveillance is identified, the system will alert the CFS staff concerned. Moreover, information on the food samples and food importers can be loaded into the FSS automatically, which would reduce the work involved in repeated manual input and verification of data, thus improving sampling efficiency and record accuracy.

11. The above systems will interface with each other to provide a well-connected information network in support of risk profiling and risk-based inspection for strengthened food safety control and traceability. The CFS will enhance the above IT systems in order of priorities, and interfacing of these systems is expected to be completed by the first quarter of 2024 or earlier.

Advice Sought

12. Members are invited to note the content of this paper and provide comments.

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