

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

**The Food Surveillance Programme
of the Centre for Food Safety**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the implementation of the Food Surveillance Programme (“FSP”) of the Centre for Food Safety (“CFS”) in 2021, as well as the arrangements for testing of frozen foods under the COVID-19 situation.

Food Surveillance Programme for 2021

2. To ensure food safety, the CFS implements the FSP to take food samples at the import, wholesale and retail levels under a risk-based principle for testing on an ongoing basis.

3. In 2021, the CFS tested about 66 300 samples¹ for regular surveillance and targeted surveys (projects listed in **Annex 1**). The test results of all samples, except for 98, were satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.9%. The unsatisfactory samples were mainly detected with hygiene indicators, preservatives or metallic contaminants exceeding the relevant standards or with undeclared allergens (details in **Annex 2**). The CFS has taken appropriate follow-up actions regarding these samples, including tracing the sources of the food consignments concerned, informing the relevant authorities of the places of origin, instructing the vendors to stop selling the identified batches of foods, requesting the importers/distributors to recall and dispose of the implicated foods as needed, making public announcements and explaining to the public the food safety risks involved, etc.

¹ This is about 9 samples per 1 000 population tested annually, which is one of the highest among developed economies.

4. The CFS has been closely monitoring the food surveillance results, food incidents in Hong Kong and other places and relevant risk analyses to keep the implementation of the FSP under regular review. Key aspects of the relevant work are set out in the following paragraphs.

Metallic Contaminants in Food

5. The Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) (Amendment) Regulation 2018 (Cap. 132V) (“the Amendment Regulation”) took full effect on 1 November 2020². The CFS has deployed resources to enhance surveillance of metallic contaminants in food to monitor compliance with the Amendment Regulation³.

6. In 2021, the CFS tested about 8 700 samples for metallic contaminants. Among them, 15 samples were detected with metallic contaminants exceeding the relevant standards or in an amount considered to be prejudicial to health according to risk assessments. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.8%.

Enhanced Surveillance of Online Food Sales

7. In recent years, e-commerce, including food transactions via the Internet, mobile applications or social media platforms (hereafter referred to as “online food sales”), has become increasingly popular. In view of this, the CFS has been closely monitoring the safety of food put up for sale online. Over 5 200 online food samples were tested under the FSP in 2021 having regard to the Covid-19 situation, representing an increase of more than 10% over the previous year. The test results of all samples, except for 11, were satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.8%. Details are set out in **Annex 3**.

² With the Amendment Regulation coming into force, the number of metallic contaminants regulated has increased from seven to 14 and the number of maximum levels for metallic contaminants in respect of different foods has increased from 19 to 144. The Amendment Regulation first took effect on 1 November 2019 on certain types of fresh food with a shorter shelf life, i.e. fresh fruits and vegetables and their juices, fresh meat and edible offal of animals and poultry, aquatic animals and poultry eggs. It is applicable to all foods from 1 November 2020 onwards.

³ In the five years prior to the implementation of the Amendment Regulation (i.e. 2015 to 2019), the CFS tested about 27 900 samples for metallic contaminants under the FSP. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.7%.

8. In its surveillance of online food sales last year, the CFS strengthened sampling of food purchased from online takeaway platforms in particular. The number of relevant samples collected increased by 1.5 times from about 220 in 2020 to about 570 in 2021. The test results of all samples, except for one, were satisfactory. The unsatisfactory sample was a prepackaged fruit product detected with undeclared allergens. The CFS has taken appropriate follow-up actions regarding this sample, including informing the vendor of the test result and instructing the person-in-charge to stop selling and recall the food consignment concerned immediately. In light of the trend for use of online takeaway platforms, the CFS will continue to monitor the food safety of these platforms, including conducting targeted surveillance of food put up for sale on such platforms. As food delivery operations of online platforms are becoming more popular, the FEHD also plans to make it clear under the existing licensing regime that the licensee of a food premises shall ensure that the foods arranged by him for delivery by an online platform or a delivery service contractor meet the requirements of the relevant licensing conditions. The FEHD will formulate the detailed arrangements of the plan later on so as to further ensure food safety.

9. In addition, the CFS stepped up efforts last year through various channels, such as its website and social media platforms, to remind traders of the requirements to obtain the relevant Restricted Food Permits for online sales from FEHD before selling restricted foods⁴ online, and to provide necessary information on their websites, online platform accounts and printed promotional materials. The CFS has also continued its efforts in providing advice on purchasing and supplying food online to the public and the trade. Members of the public are reminded to understand the nature and potential risks of the food (especially for the elderly, infants and young children, pregnant women and people with weakened immunity to avoid raw or undercooked food), purchase food from reliable vendors and consume the food as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the trade should implement strict time and temperature controls in storing and transporting food, and keep food delivery tools in hygienic conditions, among other things.

⁴ Such as chilled/frozen meat/shellfish, sushi and oysters to be eaten in raw state.

10. The FEHD will continue to closely monitor online food sale activities, including online food business operators that are not involved in food production and do not have physical premises. If FEHD officers suspect that any online food sale activity is in breach of the statutory requirements or have doubts about the source and safety of the food put up for sale, they will conduct investigations, including collecting evidence and information through decoy operations by posing as customers to make food purchases for taking appropriate actions.

Continuous Surveillance of Meat

11. Last year, the CFS tested about 6 500 samples of meat, poultry and their products under the FSP. The test results of all samples, except for eight, were satisfactory. The overall satisfaction rate was 99.9%. The unsatisfactory samples were mainly fresh meat samples detected with sulphur dioxide, a prohibited preservative in fresh or chilled meat. The remaining unsatisfactory samples were drunken chicken detected with Salmonella, pig fat detected with pesticide residues and beef jerky detected with preservatives exceeding the relevant standards. Regarding beta-adrenergic agonists, commonly known as “leanness enhancing agents”, the number of samples tested increased by more than 50% from 186 in 2020 to 293 in 2021. All samples were tested with satisfactory results.

12. The FEHD is also committed to combating suspected sale of chilled or frozen meat disguised as fresh meat. To ensure food safety and environmental hygiene, all licensed Fresh Provision Shops (“FPSs”) selling meat and market meat stalls are subject to regular inspection by the Department based on their risk levels and hygiene standards. The FEHD proactively investigates suspected cases based on the intelligence collected and the information of any complaints received. If sufficient evidence is established, prosecutions will be initiated and follow-up actions will be taken against breaches of licensing conditions of FPSs or tenancy agreements of market stalls.

13. To tackle the aforementioned issue, the FEHD conducted 50 blitz operations against 111 licensed FPSs and one market stall between 2019 and 2021. In these operations, a total of 51 prosecutions were instituted against 47 licensed FPSs and one market meat stall for selling fresh pork

and un-prepackaged chilled pork at the same premises, or selling fresh, chilled or frozen pork without permission under the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X). Among these prosecution cases, 45 have been convicted and fined, and the remaining six are pending court trial. In the same period, the FEHD cancelled the licences of two FPSs selling chilled pork disguised as fresh pork due to their breaches of licensing conditions.

Combating Food Smuggling

14. Smuggled foods, especially meat, from dubious sources may be associated with microbiological and chemical hazards, giving rise to food safety concerns particularly due to storage at inappropriate temperatures and under improper hygienic conditions during transportation. Under the Imported Game, Meat, Poultry and Eggs Regulations (Cap. 132AK), any person who imports game, meat, poultry or eggs is required to produce a health certificate issued by an issuing entity from the place of origin or obtain prior permission in writing from the FEHD. Offenders are liable upon conviction to a fine of \$50,000 and six months' imprisonment. In 2021, the CFS and relevant law enforcement agencies ("LEAs") conducted two joint operations involving about 294 tonnes of smuggled frozen meat. The CFS will continue to collaborate closely with the relevant LEAs in holding regular meetings and mounting joint operations against food smuggling. At the same time, the Customs and Excise Department ("C&ED") will also continue to combat all kinds of smuggling activities, including smuggling of frozen meat⁵.

Food Surveillance relating to the COVID-19 Situation

15. Since 2020, the CFS has been collecting samples of various types of frozen foods and their packaging from different countries/regions at the import level (i.e. the CFS's Airport Food Inspection Offices and the cold stores of importers) for COVID-19 testing. As at end-April 2022, the CFS has tested more than 30 000 relevant samples, mainly meat and aquatic products, imported from 61 countries/regions. All samples were

⁵ In 2021, the C&ED detected 16 cases of smuggling of frozen meat, involving seizure of close to 34 tonnes of meat.

tested negative for the virus thus far, except for 11 samples with details as follows –

- (a) three pomfret fish samples (two food surface samples and one packaging sample) from Indonesia in August 2021;
- (b) two cuttlefish slice samples (one food surface sample and one packaging sample) from Malaysia in November 2021;
- (c) three beef samples from Brazil and one pork skin sample from Poland (all packaging samples) in February 2022; and
- (d) one ox offal sample and one chicken leg sample (all packaging samples) from Brazil in April 2022.

16. In relation to the aforementioned positive cases, the FEHD and the Centre for Health Protection (“CHP”) of the Department of Health (“DH”) conducted prompt investigations into the vendors and locations concerned to identify individuals having contacted the products for epidemiological assessment. Arrangements were made for the individuals concerned to undergo quarantine or compulsory testing and for the relevant premises to undertake cleansing and disinfection. The CFS has also stepped up efforts to collect samples of frozen foods and their packaging imported from these origins for COVID-19 testing. Meanwhile, a hold-and-test arrangement has been fully implemented for the imported food items to be released only after all samples collected from the same consignment are tested negative, with a view to closely monitoring and preventing the risk of importing the Covid-19 virus through imported frozen foods.

17. To enhance monitoring of the risks arising from handling frozen foods, since 17 November 2021, designated cold store practitioners are required via compulsory testing notices issued under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) to undergo COVID-19 nucleic acid testing on a regular basis. At present, fully vaccinated cold store practitioners are required to undergo testing at 7-day intervals, while those who are yet to be fully vaccinated shall be tested daily.

18. Meanwhile, the CFS, in consultation with the CHP of the DH, has issued the “Health Advice for Frozen Food Handlers on the Prevention of COVID-19” and the “Prevention of COVID-19: Guidance on Disinfecting

the Working Environment and the Food Package of Cold Stores at Import Level” to the food trade and licensed cold stores. The CFS will continue to remind frozen food handlers of the potential risks of infection and the need to take precautionary measures such as observing good personal hygiene practices, putting on personal protection equipment, and maintaining environmental hygiene and social distancing.

Advice Sought

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

Centre for Food Safety
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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Projects under Food Surveillance Programme 2021

(A) Regular Food Surveillance

Covering major food groups such as fruits and vegetables, meat, poultry, aquatic products, milk and cereals.

(B) Targeted Food Surveillance

- (i) Metallic contaminants in food
- (ii) Sulphur dioxide in meat
- (iii) Summer Food Surveillance (including *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, *Salmonella*, Coagulase-positive staphylococci organisms, *Bacillus cereus* and *Clostridium perfringens* in ready-to-eat foods)

(C) Seasonal Food Surveillance

- (i) Lunar New Year food
- (ii) Rice dumplings
- (iii) Mooncakes
- (iv) Hairy crabs
- (v) Lap mei
- (vi) Poon choi

(D) Surveys on Popular Food Items

- (i) Hot pot food and soup bases

Annex 2

Sample Test Results of Food Surveillance Programme 2021

(By food groups)

Food groups (Examples of related food products)	Number of samples tested	Number of unsatisfactory samples (unsatisfactory rate)	Testing items (number of unsatisfactory samples)
Vegetables, fruits and related products (e.g. dates, dried mandarin peels and fermented bean curds)	25 000	40 (0.16%)	Pesticide residues (13) Undeclared allergens (12) Metallic contaminants (10) Preservatives (4) Pathogens (1)
Milk, milk products and frozen confections (e.g. ice cream, cheese and yoghurt)	10 500	18 (0.17%)	Hygiene indicators (17) Composition (1)
Aquatic products and related products (e.g. fish balls, fish sausages and imitation crab meat)	7 900	20 (0.25%)	Veterinary drug residues (12) Metallic contaminants (5) Preservatives (2) Colouring matters (1)
Meat, poultry and related products (e.g. Chinese preserved sausages, meat balls and dried meat)	6 500	8 (0.12%)	Preservatives (6) Pathogens (1) Veterinary drug residues (1)
Cereals and cereal products (e.g. noodles and pasta, flour and popcorn)	4 200	5 (0.12%)	Undeclared allergens (4) Preservatives (1)
Others (e.g. dim sum, sugar and sweets, seasonings, beverages and composite food)	12 200	7 (0.06%)	Preservatives (3) Pathogens (2) Veterinary drug residues (1) Hygiene indicators (1)
Total	66 300	98 (0.15%)	

Sample Test Results of Food Surveillance Programme 2021

(By sampling level)

Sampling level	Number of samples tested	Number of unsatisfactory samples (unsatisfactory rate)	Testing items (number of unsatisfactory samples)
Import	33 100	16 (0.05%)	Hygiene indicators (7) Pesticide residues (4) Metallic contaminants (4) Composition (1)
Wholesale	3 400	6 (0.17%)	Veterinary drug residues (2) Pesticide residues (2) Hygiene indicators (2)
Retail	29 800	76 (0.26%)	Preservatives (16) Undeclared allergens (16) Metallic contaminants (11) Veterinary drug residues (11) Hygiene indicators (9) Pesticide residues (8) Pathogens (4) Colouring matters (1)
Total	66 300	98 (0.15%)	

2021 Online Food Surveillance Results

Food groups	Number of samples tested	Number of unsatisfactory samples (unsatisfactory rate)	Testing items (number of unsatisfactory samples)
Vegetables, fruits and related products	1 083	6 # (0.55%)	Undeclared allergens (3) Metallic contaminants (1) Pesticide residues (1) Preservatives (1)
Aquatic products and related products	1 115	2 (0.18%)	Veterinary drug residues (1) Preservatives (1)
Cereals and cereal products	741	1 (0.13%)	Preservatives (1)
Meat, poultry and related products	719	2 (0.28%)	Preservatives (2)
Milk, milk products and frozen confections	198	0	N.A.
Others*	1 386	0	N.A.
Total	5 242	11 (0.21%)	

* Other foods include eggs and egg products, rice dishes, noodles and pasta, dim sum, dishes, salads, pizza, sandwiches and burgers, desserts, bakery products, soups and drinks.

One of the unsatisfactory samples was a prepackaged fruit product purchased from an online takeaway platform.