

Chapter 9

Food Safety, Environmental Hygiene, Agriculture and Fisheries

Hong Kong has in place a broad range of tools, facilities and strict rules to ensure that food consumed in the city is safe. The safeguards are vital because Hong Kong imports 95 per cent of its foodstuffs. Environmental hygiene is also a round-the-clock watch to protect public health and to raise living standards.

Organisational Framework

The Food and Health Bureau is responsible for drawing up policies on food safety, environmental hygiene, animal health, and matters concerning agriculture and fisheries in Hong Kong. It also allocates resources for carrying out these policies.

In the areas of food safety and environmental hygiene, the bureau works closely with two departments: the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD).

The FEHD is tasked with ensuring that food in Hong Kong is safe for consumption and that environmental hygiene standards are high.

The AFCD is responsible for implementing policies governing the agricultural and fisheries industries and for helping them to stay competitive by providing them with infrastructural and technical support such as market facilities and animal disease diagnostic services. The department also administers loans to them and advises the Government on animal health matters.

Public Cleansing Services

The FEHD provides services for street cleansing, household waste collection and public toilets. All streets are swept between one and eight times a day, depending on practical needs. For main thoroughfares, flyovers and high-speed roads, mechanised cleansing is provided. In 2008, about 67 per cent of street cleansing services were outsourced. The FEHD and its contractors together maintained a fleet of 108 street washing vehicles to wash streets and flush heavily used pavements, hawker black spots and market areas.

Daily collection of household waste is carried out all year round. In 2008, about 69 per cent of waste collection services were outsourced and about 5 160 tonnes of household waste were collected each day by a fleet of 235 refuse collection vehicles maintained by the FEHD and its contractors.

The FEHD continues to provide toilet attendants at heavily used public toilets. In 2008, about 57 per cent of public toilets were serviced by toilet attendants. Eight public toilets and one aqua privy were refurbished and 24 aqua privies were converted to flushing toilets in an ongoing drive to improve such facilities.

The FEHD and six other departments take strong action against people who dirty public places by littering, spitting, and carrying out similar anti-social acts. In 2008, some 34 000 fixed penalty notices were served on offenders.

Abatement of Sanitary Nuisances

To deal with sanitary nuisances such as refuse accumulation, water dripping from air-conditioners and water seepage from private premises, the FEHD issues Nuisance Notices requiring responsible parties to take necessary action to stop the nuisances. Prosecutions are taken out against those who fail to comply with the Nuisance Notices. During the year, the FEHD issued 2 573 such notices and initiated 42 prosecutions.

Pest Control

Preventing the spread of pest-borne diseases is one of FEHD's tasks. The department reviews constantly the methodology and strategy for controlling the spread of pests. Anti-rodent and anti-mosquito campaigns are carried out across Hong Kong annually to urge people to help curb the spread of these pests.

The department continued its close surveillance of *Aedes albopictus*, a major carrier of dengue fever in Hong Kong. Anti-mosquito teams conducted some 673 000 inspections of possible mosquito breeding spots and eliminated some 65 800 of them during the year.

Cemeteries and Crematoria

As land is scarce in Hong Kong, the Government encourages cremation of the dead. Normally, human remains in public cemeteries are exhumed after six years for cremation or re-interment in urn cemeteries.

To provide more alternatives for the disposal of cremated ashes and ease the shortage of niches, the Government encourages the scattering of cremated ashes at designated Hong Kong waters and in gardens of remembrance.

The FEHD operates six government crematoria, 11 public cemeteries and eight columbaria, and oversees the management of 28 private cemeteries.

Licensing of Food Premises and Other Trades

The FEHD is the licensing authority for food businesses. It also issues permits for the sale of restricted foods, including Chinese herb tea, milk, frozen confections, sushi and sashimi, as well as licences for places of public entertainment such as theatres, cinemas and entertainment machine centres. Additionally, it issues trade licences for private swimming pools, commercial bathhouses and factories that tan hides and process shark fins (regarded as offensive trades). The FEHD also provides support to the Liquor Licensing Board, an independent statutory body that issues liquor licences (including club liquor licences). The Chief Executive appoints members of the board who meet about four times a month to consider licence applications.

During the year, the department handled 3 089 applications for food business licences, 827 permits for restricted foods, 1 133 licences for places of public entertainment, 43 licences for other trades, 856 liquor and club liquor licences, and 53 permits for karaoke establishments in premises with restaurant licences.

The department continues to streamline licensing procedures in line with the Government's policy of facilitating business operations in Hong Kong.

The FEHD executed closure orders against three food premises where food poisoning occurred and against one unlicensed food premises.

Food Safety and Labelling

The FEHD is tasked with ensuring that food for human consumption is safe. It has effective food control measures to do the job.

The Government has a Centre for Food Safety (CFS) within the FEHD to further strengthen its monitoring of foodstuff.

Under the food surveillance programme, 66 726 samples of foodstuff were taken at import, wholesale and retail points in 2008 for chemical, microbiological and radiological testing as part of the work of ensuring food safety.

A total of 28 467 vehicles carrying vegetables, and 42 178 vehicles carrying live food animals including pigs, cattle, goats and poultry were inspected at the Food Control Office and Animal Inspection Station at Man Kam To during the year. A total of 7 880 142 live food animals were examined and 71 302 blood and 32 442 urine, faecal and tissue samples were tested for disease and veterinary drug residues.

In 2008, amendments to three regulations governing food standards and food labelling were passed by the Legislative Council. The one concerning the use of preservatives and antioxidants in food went into operation on July 1, but the trade was given two years to make the changeover. The one relating to food colouring went into effect on December 1, prohibiting the use of a substance called Red 2G to colour food consumed in Hong Kong, while the regulation governing nutrition labelling will go into force in July 2010.

The CFS is reviewing the regulatory framework for the control of pesticide and veterinary drug residues in food.

The Government is also drawing up a food safety bill to introduce a new regulatory regime to improve food safety protection.

The FEHD worked closely with the food caterers and organisers of the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian Events held in Hong Kong to ensure 'zero incident in food poisoning' throughout the events, an aim that was achieved with the concerted efforts of all stakeholders. The arrangements included checks on food samples and the setting up of a Food Safety Advisory Team to ensure that the services rendered by the food caterers and hotels met the strictest international safety standards.

The Mainland authorities revealed in September that some babies had developed renal stones as a result of consuming milk powder tainted with melamine, a harmful chemical. The revelation caused grave concern in Hong Kong, and the local authorities quickly formed an expert group to monitor the incident. The Harmful Substances in Food (Amendment) Regulation 2008 was gazetted in September to set the legal limits of melamine in foods. A systematic food surveillance programme on milk and other foodstuff was conducted by CFS. About 5 000 food samples were tested between mid-September and December of which 40, or less than one per cent, were found to contain melamine exceeding the legal limits. Foodstuff exceeding the legal limits have been removed from shop shelves.

Enhanced Measures against Avian Influenza

Under an agreement between the Mainland and Hong Kong, all poultry (except pigeons) imported from the Mainland are required to be vaccinated against H5 avian influenza (commonly known as bird flu). Government veterinarians also pay regular visits to registered Mainland farms to ensure that the poultry they export to Hong Kong are healthy.

The existing law prohibits the keeping of chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons, quails and other poultry in backyards. Offenders are fined between \$50,000 and \$100,000. People who kept poultry as pets before the ban went into effect are required to have exemption permits to continue keeping them. Owners of racing pigeons are required to have exhibition licences.

New licensing conditions require pet bird traders to submit to the health authorities official health certificates, or documents such as invoices showing the places of origin of their birds, or the names and addresses of their suppliers. Sale of birds from unknown sources is prohibited. Bird traders must also keep up-to-date records of their transactions and the number of birds in their possession.

To prevent virus from accumulating in retail outlets, the Government introduced a new law in July that prohibits the keeping of live poultry overnight in retail premises.

The Food Business (Amendment) Regulation 2008 states that all poultry in public market stalls and fresh provision shops must be slaughtered by 8 pm every day and that live poultry are not allowed in those premises before 5 am the next day.

Live poultry retailers are also required to observe a set of strict safety rules. They must ensure that people working at their outlets wear protective clothing and report any dead poultry to the FEHD immediately when a dead bird is found. They must not overstock live poultry in their premises and must affix acrylic panels to their poultry cages to prevent direct contact between customers and the poultry. They are also responsible for preventing customers from touching live poultry.

During the year, the Government suspended temporarily the importation of live poultry or poultry meat from a number of countries and cities, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, North Korea, Indonesia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Japan, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Cote d'Ivoire, Ribatejo Norte of Portugal, Washington County of Arkansas, and Canada, following reports of avian influenza outbreaks in those places. The suspension will be completely lifted if FEHD is satisfied with the control and management measures taken and the countries have regained their Notifiable Avian Influenza free status.

All live poultry entering Hong Kong have to be tested for avian influenza before being released to their importers.

Hong Kong observes stringent rules to keep bird flu at bay. The measures include close monitoring of farms and markets, vaccination of chickens and close surveillance of all birds brought into Hong Kong, or already in the city.

Bird blood samples and/or faecal swabs are collected regularly from poultry farms, wholesale and retail markets, regardless of whether the samples are from healthy, sick or dead birds. The same is done with birds kept in recreation parks, pet shops, and wild birds in wetlands and elsewhere. A quick, realtime method of testing samples for avian influenza, known by the acronym PCR, is used in Hong Kong. The Government provides a round-the-clock service for receiving birds brought in for examination, regardless of whether the birds are dead, or in a weak state.

In June, the H5N1 virus was detected in four markets in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories. As a result, about 6 000 birds in retail outlets across Hong Kong were culled. The Government subsequently suspended live poultry imports from the Mainland and local poultry farms stopped delivering poultry to markets. The suspension was lifted on July 2.

Meanwhile, some poultry traders appealed to the Government to buy them out, complaining that it was very difficult not to keep live poultry overnight at retail outlets. In response, the Government drew up a buyout plan which ended in September and received 611 applications from farmers, wholesalers, transport operators and retailers. The largest number of applications were submitted by transport operators (199) and retailers (333).

Avian influenza was detected in a local chicken farm on December 9, requiring the AFCD to cull around 68 000 chickens and destroy about 26 000 fertilised eggs. As a precautionary measure, some 18 000 chickens in another farm located within a 3-kilometre radius of the infected farm were also culled. Furthermore, some 18 000

birds were culled at the wholesale market. Imports and other movements of live poultry were halted for 21 days.

The AFCD runs training programme for staff who carry out poultry culling while the AFCD and FEHD conduct culling drills annually.

Public Markets and Cooked Food Markets

Two new markets were opened: Aldrich Bay Market on August 1 and Wan Chai Market on September 1, bringing to 105 the number of public markets run by the FEHD.

Hawkers

The FEHD regulates hawking activities in Hong Kong. As at December 31, 2008, there were 6 589 hawkers carrying out business in licensed fixed-pitch stalls and 546 itinerant hawkers.

Slaughterhouses

There are three licensed slaughterhouses in Hong Kong. They are the Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse, Tsuen Wan Slaughterhouse and Cheung Chau Slaughterhouse which the FEHD oversees to ensure they meet the prescribed hygiene standards.

During the year, 38 512 health certificates and 9 501 entry permits for local pigs were verified at the slaughterhouses, and 31 009 samples of urine and tissue were taken from animals there for checks on veterinary drug residues. A total of 1 544 450 pigs, 28 606 cattle and 10 089 goats were slaughtered at the three facilities. Meat supplied by the slaughterhouses is inspected by health officials before it is released for sale.

The FEHD's Intelligence Unit continued to track down vendors selling chilled meat as fresh meat and regularly joined forces with the Customs and Excise Department and the Police to curb meat smuggling. Together they carried out 33 raids in 2008; made seven arrests and seized 1.4 tonnes of contraband meat. The crackdown also resulted in two Fresh Provision Shop licences being cancelled.

Public Education

The FEHD runs a Health Education Exhibition and Resource Centre in Kowloon Park, Tsim Sha Tsui, and a Communication Resource Unit at the Fa Yuen Street Municipal Services Building in Mong Kok to stress the importance of food safety and environmental hygiene.

During the year, 2 770 health talks were given to the general public and various target groups, including food handlers, school children, foreign domestic helpers, the elderly and new arrivals to Hong Kong. A vehicle was also used as a mobile education centre to spread the word.

A mass publicity campaign promoting the 'Five Keys to Food Safety' was launched in mid-2008. The message was hammered across in posters, public

announcements, TV clips, flyers and a road show. Furthermore, the food trade was invited to join hands with the Government to promote the Five Keys to Food Safety to their staff and customers. Trade associations and members of the trade were invited to sign the 'Food Safety Charter'. A total of 20 food trade associations and over 1 600 licensed food premises/supermarkets/convenient stores have signed the Charter.

Primary Production

Hong Kong's agriculture and fisheries industries are relatively small. They do not receive Government subsidies, but are helped by the Government to improve the quality of their output and enhance their productivity and competitiveness.

The combined output of the two industries was worth \$2.6 billion in 2008. Vegetables' share of the output was 3 per cent, cut flowers, 35 per cent, live pigs 6 per cent, live poultry 45 per cent, freshwater fish, 5 per cent, and local seafood, 26 per cent. Some 15 800 people were employed directly in these industries in 2008.

Agriculture Industry

Hong Kong's agricultural industry focuses mainly on producing quality fresh food crops through intensive land use. Farming is done largely in the New Territories but only 2 per cent of the land there is being used for growing crops which comprise mainly vegetables and cut flowers, whose combined output in 2008 was valued at about \$260 million. Pigs and poultry are the principal animals reared for food. Locally reared pigs fetched about \$213 million, while poultry, including chickens and chicken eggs, earned about \$213 million.

To stay in business, Hong Kong's agricultural industry has to adapt to fast-changing market trends as it is constrained by the limited supply of farm land and labour, competition from imports, high cost of maintaining environmental standards and calls for improved farm hygiene and safe produce.

The AFCD encourages crop farmers to tap niche markets and to sharpen their competitiveness by cultivating safe, good quality vegetables. The department works with local organic farming groups and the Vegetable Marketing Organisation to promote organic farming and to develop a market for organic vegetables.

The department provides an organic farming support service to some 123 farms located on about 48 hectares of land. The AFCD also promotes the use of greenhouse technology for intensive high-value crop production. During the year, four improved varieties of vegetable and fruit — little cucumber, leafy beet, dark leaf Chinese white cabbage and small sweet melon — were introduced to farmers for cultivation in Hong Kong. The voluntary Accredited Farm Scheme managed by the AFCD and the Vegetable Marketing Organisation since 1994 provides a stable supply of high quality and safe vegetables. A total of 250 farms, spread over 2 117 hectares of land, have so far been accredited under the scheme.

Fisheries Industry

Fresh fish is one of Hong Kong's most important primary products. In 2008, fish caught and fish reared in ponds and floating cages at sea amounted to about 162 000 tonnes. Their combined value was \$1.92 billion.

Hong Kong's fishing fleet consists of some 3 750 vessels, manned by about 7 900 local fishermen and 5 000 Mainland deckhands. The predominant fishing method is trawling, which accounted for 86 per cent of fish caught, weighing about 136 500 tonnes. Other methods include lining, gill netting and purse-seining. The total catch weighed 158 000 tonnes and had an estimated wholesale value of \$1.78 billion. The industry provided some 49 600 tonnes of fish for local consumption during the year.

Under licence issued by the AFCD, 1 066 mariculturists operate in 26 designated fish culture zones. They supplied the market with 1 370 tonnes of live marine fish valued at \$82 million in 2008.

Freshwater and brackish water fish is reared in fish ponds, most of which are located in the northwestern part of the New Territories. With the increasing urbanisation of the New Territories, commercial production of pond fish has gradually declined. Pond fish culture yielded some 2 270 tonnes of fish, or 5 per cent of freshwater fish for local consumption in 2008.

The AFCD continued to pursue a number of fisheries management and conservation measures, and stepped up action against destructive fishing practices to promote sustainable development of the fishing industry and to conserve fish resources in Hong Kong waters. In 2008, a total of 1 200 cubic meters of artificial reefs were used to boost fish resources and to conserve the ecology of Hong Kong waters.

In addition, the AFCD continued to assist fishermen to switch to sustainable modes of operation. Credit facilities were provided for fishermen to switch to sustainable fisheries, or related operations, and for fish farmers to develop their aquaculture business. The department also helped fishermen cope with the annual fishing moratorium in the South China Sea imposed by the Mainland authorities by providing them with technical support, liaison services and credit facilities.

The Committee on Sustainable Fisheries was established in late 2006 to advise the Government on the long-term goals, direction, and strategy for the sustainable development of Hong Kong's fisheries industry.

The AFCD conducts studies and provides technical services to fish farmers to strengthen the aquaculture industry's sustainability. The department continues to implement a fish health management programme to help fish farmers prevent, diagnose and contain fish disease to minimise loss. A new 'Good Aquaculture Practices Programme' was launched in 2008 to enhance fish farm management.

Under the programme, AFCD staff visit fish farms regularly to collect water and fish samples for analysis. Seminars are held for farmers to learn new techniques and

good management practices. The department also continues to search for new fish species, with market potential, to introduce to local fish farmers.

The AFCD's Accredited Fish Farm Scheme continues to work well. It is a voluntary scheme set up in 2005 to strengthen the aquaculture industry's competitiveness. Participants are required to adopt good practices to raise their farms' hygiene standards and fish quality. Tests, including analyses of drug residues and heavy metals in fish, are conducted to ensure the cultured fish are safe to eat before they are sold. Eighty farms have so far joined the scheme. Together, they sold over 20 000 kilogrammes of the accredited fish, comprising Pompano, grey mullets and green groupers in 2008. The accredited fish carry tags bearing the scheme's name, 'Accredited Fish Farm Scheme', for easy recognition. The AFCD works with the Fish Marketing Organisation to encourage the industry to develop quality brand names.

The AFCD set up an experimental fish hatchery in Ta Kwu Ling in mid-2008 to help farmers rear fish more efficiently. In September, a workshop was conducted there jointly with the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific to help local farmers acquire technical know-how and share practical experience with the overseas experts. The department also succeeded in producing jade perch fry using an induced spawning technique which it introduced to the farmers to help them maintain a stable supply of this species at lower costs.

Specially designed artificial reefs known as biofilters are used to improve water quality and seabed conditions at the fish culture zones. There are biofilters at the culture zones at Kau Sai, Sham Wan and Lo Tik Wan.

The department continues to monitor red tides to protect the mariculture industry. It can now detect these tides as they start to form and take early action to deal with them. Red tide warnings are disseminated through support groups at the fish culture zones. Warnings are also posted on the AFCD's website and conveyed through press releases. In 2008, a total of 15 red tides were recorded in Hong Kong waters.

Wholesale Markets

Fresh food produce is sold in wholesale markets managed by the AFCD, the Vegetable Marketing Organisation, the Fish Marketing Organisation and the private sector. During the year, the Government's wholesale markets handled 304 000 tonnes of vegetables, 18 000 tonnes of poultry, 46 000 tonnes of freshwater fish and fish products, 96 000 tonnes of fruit and 56 000 tonnes of eggs with a combined valued of \$5.5 billion.

The Western Wholesale Food Market and the Cheung Sha Wan Wholesale Food Market are the two largest composite wholesale food markets managed by the department. The Western Wholesale Food Market, for example, accommodates markets for freshwater fish, vegetables, fruit, poultry and eggs, enabling customers to purchase a wide range of fresh foods under one roof.

The AFCD also manages two temporary wholesale markets, in the North District for fresh vegetables, and in Cheung Sha Wan, for live poultry.

The Vegetable Marketing Organisation is a statutory body governed by the Agricultural Products (Marketing) Ordinance. It provides orderly wholesale marketing services for the sale of vegetables. It charges a commission on the vegetables sold, and in return provides trading facilities, transport and pesticide residue testing services to farmers and traders. Any surplus income is channelled back into farming development and scholarships for farmers' children. In 2008, the organisation handled 177 000 tonnes of vegetables valued at \$972 million.

The Fish Marketing Organisation is also a statutory body governed by the Marine Fish (Marketing) Ordinance. It provides orderly wholesale marketing services at its seven wholesale markets. Revenue comes from commissions from fish sales and from fees charged for the use of the market facilities. Surplus earnings are channeled back to the fisheries industry by way of providing low-interest loans to fishermen, improving market services and facilities and providing training grants and scholarships for the fishermen and their children. During the year, 51 000 tonnes of marine fish valued at \$1.7 billion were sold through the organisation. The organisation continues to develop quality fish products at its processing centre to help promote local products.

Animal Management

Rabies is under effective control in Hong Kong, which has been rabies-free since the 1980s.

In 2008, some 52 000 dogs were licensed and vaccinated against rabies. The AFCD brought into their Animal Management Centres about 12 000 dogs and 5 100 cats during the year. Most were strays but some were surrendered by their owners. New homes were found for about 700 healthy dogs and 180 healthy cats.

All pet shops selling animals must be licensed by the AFCD which inspects these shops regularly to ensure they do not contravene any of the licence conditions laid down to protect public health and safety as well as the safety, health and welfare of the animals.

The AFCD runs a vigorous programme for promoting respect and care for animals. It uses a broad range of communication tools to get the message across. These include posters, radio and television announcements, press releases and exhibitions. The 'Love for Life' carnival was held with great success in March, drawing more than 18 000 spectators, animal lovers and participants to the fair ground.

2008 Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian Events

As Hong Kong's inspection and quarantine authority for animals, the AFCD was fully engaged in ensuring that the hundreds of horses brought to the city for the Olympic and Paralympic equestrian events in August and September were safely housed and protected from health hazards.

While all competing horses had already been given a clean bill of health before arriving in Hong Kong, they were nevertheless kept in isolation in different places across Hong Kong before they were allowed onto the events ground.

The horses and their living environment were closely monitored by the AFCD and no infectious diseases were reported among the horses during their stay. All horses were safely returned to their places of origin after the competitions. The World Organisation of Animal Health commended Hong Kong for hosting successfully the Equestrian Events.

Websites

Food and Health Bureau: www.fhb.gov.hk

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department: www.fehd.gov.hk

Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department: www.afcd.gov.hk