

Chapter 9

Food Safety, Environmental Hygiene, Agriculture and Fisheries

With over 90 per cent of its food imported, Hong Kong devotes considerable efforts to ensuring that the wide variety of food available for consumption is safe. The government is committed to maintaining a clean and hygienic living environment and to protecting the public at large from threats of zoonotic disease.

Organisational Framework

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) is responsible for drawing up policies (and allocating resources for their implementation) on food safety, environmental hygiene, animal health, agriculture and fisheries in Hong Kong. It works closely with the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and the Government Laboratory (GL).

The FEHD ensures that food sold in Hong Kong is safe and fit for consumption and that a clean and hygienic living environment is maintained for the people of Hong Kong.

The AFCD implements policies governing the agricultural and fisheries industries and provides 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.

The GL provides testing services to support the regular food surveillance programme of the FEHD's Centre for Food Safety (CFS) and assists the CFS in handling food incidents.

Licensing of Food Premises and Other Trades

The FEHD is the licensing authority for food businesses. It issues various food business licences, permits for the sale of restricted foods (including Chinese herbal tea, milk, frozen confections, sushi and sashimi) and licences for places of public entertainment (such as theatres, cinemas and entertainment machine centres). The department also licenses private swimming pools, commercial bathhouses and factories engaged in offensive trades. The FEHD provides executive and secretarial support to the Liquor Licensing Board, an independent statutory body that issues liquor licences, including those for clubs.

During 2013, the FEHD issued 7,537 full, provisional and temporary food business licences, 658 permits for restricted foods, 1,556 licences for places of public entertainment, 37 licences for other trades, 919 liquor and club liquor licences, and 18 permits for karaoke establishments in premises with restaurant licences.

Since 1 January 2013, the FEHD accepts submission of applications for food business/trade licences and permits through the internet.

Food Safety and Labelling

The FEHD's Centre for Food Safety (CFS) is responsible for ensuring that food sold in Hong Kong is safe and fit for consumption. About 65,000 samples of food were taken at import, wholesale and retail points for chemical, microbiological and radiological testing in 2013. The overall satisfaction rate of these tests was 99.9 per cent.

During 2013, about 32,700 vehicles carrying vegetables, and about 43,000 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, and about 4,863,200 live food animals were examined and about 50,900 blood and 57,600 urine, faecal and tissue samples were tested for zoonotic disease and veterinary drug residues.

The nutrition labelling scheme requires pre-packaged foods, unless exempted, to carry labels that provide information about energy and specified nutrients, and also specifies the conditions for making nutrition claims. The scheme assists consumers to make informed food choices, regulates misleading or deceptive labels and nutrition claims, and encourages food manufacturers to apply sound nutrition principles in the formulation of foods. In 2013, the CFS conducted visual checks on 5,151 pre-packaged food products to ensure that they complied with the statutory '1+7' nutrition-labelling requirements and took 505 food samples for chemical analysis to verify the nutrition information and nutrition claims. The overall compliance rate was 97.71 per cent.

In January, the government completed a two-month public consultation exercise which found strong support for its legislative proposals relating to formula products and foods intended for infants and young children under the age of 36 months. The government has started drafting the legislation for tabling in the Legislative Council in 2014.

Public Markets and Cooked Food Markets

The FEHD operates 101 public markets (including 25 free-standing cooked food markets) with some 14,400 stalls selling fresh products, cooked food, light refreshments and household items and providing service trades. As at the end of 2013, the occupancy rate at these markets was 90.4 per cent.

In 2013, the FHB commissioned a consultancy study on improvements to the public markets' operating environment, including their functions and positioning, factors affecting their competitiveness, public expectations and ways to retain traditional trades. The consultant is expected to submit preliminary study findings in mid-2014.

Hawkers

The FEHD regulates hawking in Hong Kong. As at the end of 2013, there were 5,979 hawkers carrying out business in licensed fixed-pitch stalls and 455 itinerant hawkers.

A five-year 'Assistance Scheme for Hawkers in Fixed-pitch Hawker Areas' was launched in June to provide financial assistance to 4,300 hawkers in the 43 fixed-pitch hawker areas to relocate their stalls or reconstruct them in situ in order to reduce fire risks in hawker areas. To free up pitches for relocation of stalls posing particular fire risk, an ex-gratia payment is also offered to hawkers who voluntarily surrender their licences. Up to the end of 2013, the FEHD have received 185 applications for relocation and reconstruction grants and 204 hawkers have surrendered their licences.

Slaughterhouses

The FEHD oversees the hygiene standards of licensed slaughterhouses in Sheung Shui, Tsuen Wan and Cheung Chau. Meat supplied by the slaughterhouses has to pass inspection by health officials before delivery to markets. During 2013, 40,697 animal health certificates and 9,309 entry permits for local pigs were verified at the slaughterhouses, 54,797 samples of urine and tissue were taken from animals and tested for veterinary drug residues, and 1,669,824 pigs, 19,223 cattle and 6,093 goats were slaughtered.

The FEHD's Intelligence Unit continued to track down vendors selling chilled meat as fresh meat in 2013 and, in collaboration with the Customs and Excise Department and the Centre for Food Safety carried out 20 raids, launched 19 prosecutions and seized 0.53 tonnes of smuggled meat.

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 their condition. For main thoroughfares, flyovers and high-speed roads, mechanised cleansing is provided. In 2013, about 77 per cent of street cleansing services were outsourced. The FEHD and its contractors provide regular washing and flushing services for heavily used pavements, hawker black-spots and market areas. Additional cleansing services are provided where necessary to maintain environmental cleanliness and hygiene.

Household waste is collected all year round. In 2013, about 73 per cent of waste collection services were outsourced and about 5,340 tonnes of household waste were collected daily by the FEHD and its contractors.

In 2013, 12 public toilets and nine aqua privies were refurbished while 67 aqua privies were converted to flushing toilets in an ongoing drive to improve such facilities. Toilet attendant services are provided at heavily used public toilets.

The FEHD takes enforcement action against littering, spitting, and other unhygienic practices in public places. In 2013, the FEHD issued some 34,900 fixed penalty notices.

Abatement of Sanitary Nuisances

In 2013, the FEHD issued 5,136 Nuisance Notices requiring those responsible to stop sanitary nuisances such as refuse accumulation, water dripping from air-conditioners and water seepage in private premises, and instituted 102 prosecutions against those who failed to comply with the notices.

Pest Control

Preventing the spread of pest-borne diseases is one of FEHD's prime tasks. The department reviews constantly the methodology and strategy for controlling the spread of pests. Campaigns are carried out across Hong Kong annually to urge people to help stop the spread of rodents and mosquitoes. The department maintains close surveillance of *Aedes albopictus*, a major carrier of dengue fever in Hong Kong. Anti-mosquito teams conducted about 764,000 inspections of likely mosquito breeding spots and eliminated about 46,200 mosquito breeding places during the year.

Cemeteries and Crematoria

The FEHD operates six government crematoria, 10 public cemeteries and eight public columbaria, and monitors the management of 27 private cemeteries.

The FEHD actively promotes environmentally friendly and sustainable ways of handling ashes and alternative ways of paying tribute to the deceased. The government encourages scattering of ashes in the FEHD's 11 Gardens of Remembrance. The FEHD also provides a free ferry service for scattering ashes at sea and an Internet Memorial Service for the public to pay homage to the deceased (www.memorial.gov.hk), which is also accessible through mobile phone (m.memorial.gov.hk).

Columbaria

There was further progress in 2013 regarding the sites identified in each of the 18 districts for columbaria development. The Cheung Chau Cemetery extension (offering about 1 000 niches) was completed in December, and detailed design and site investigation works for columbarium development at the Sandy Ridge Cemetery (expected to provide 200 000 niches by batches starting from 2022) commenced in June.

Following two rounds of public consultation in 2010 and 2011, the government aims to introduce a Bill into the Legislative Council in the second quarter of 2014 to enhance the regulation of private columbaria.

Public Education

In 2013, the FEHD's Health Education Exhibition and Resource Centre in Kowloon Park, Tsim Sha Tsui, organised 2,368 health talks for the general public and target groups, including school children, the elderly and ethnic minorities. A motor vehicle is also used as a mobile education centre to help disseminate food safety and environmental hygiene messages.

The CFS's Communication Resource Unit in the Fa Yuen Street Municipal Services Building, Mong Kok, organises food safety programmes and provides technical support to people in the food trade and the public. As of December 2013, 23 food trade associations and some 1,660 food premises and retail outlets had signed up to the CFS's Food Safety Charter, drawn up to promote best practices in handling food.

The CFS conducted 185 health talks on food safety during the year. It also deployed two vans to broadcast food safety messages in housing estates and markets and launched a series of food safety promotion activities under the slogan 'Make a Wise Food Choice'. These activities aimed to ensure food safety by encouraging good food-buying habits, such as sourcing food from reliable suppliers and choosing food according to one's health condition. The CFS also continued to promote nutrition labelling and the wider use of nutrition labels to help people make suitable food choices.

Measures against Avian Influenza

Government measures to keep avian influenza (AI) at bay include stringent monitoring of the poultry supply chain from farm to retail levels, vaccination of chickens against H5 AI and close surveillance of imported and local birds in Hong Kong.

Under an agreement with the Mainland, all poultry (except pigeons) imported from registered farms must be vaccinated against H5 AI, commonly known as bird flu. Every live poultry consignment bound for Hong Kong must be tested negative for AI before being released for sale. Government veterinarians also inspect registered farms in the Mainland to ensure their compliance with the bio-security requirements so that the imported poultry are safe for human consumption.

Keeping chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons, quails and other poultry in backyards is prohibited in Hong Kong. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$100,000. Owners of racing pigeons are required to hold exhibition licences. Pet bird traders are required to submit official health certificates to the health authorities, 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.

All live poultry in public market stalls and fresh provision shops must be slaughtered by 8 pm every day. Live poultry are not allowed in these premises between 8 pm and 5 am the next day. Live poultry retailers must ensure that people working in retail outlets wear protective clothing and report immediately to the FEHD any dead poultry found. They must not overstock live poultry on 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.

To monitor AI effectively, samples are collected regularly for testing from poultry farms, wholesale and retail markets, from healthy, sick or dead birds, and from birds kept in recreation parks, pet shops, and from wild birds in wetlands and elsewhere. The government also provides

a round-the-clock service for collecting sick and dead wild birds. In 2013, only one of some 15,200 wild bird carcasses received by the AFCD was confirmed to be H5 A1-infected.

On 31 March 2013, the National Health and Family Planning Commission of the Mainland notified the World Health Organisation (WHO) of the first three cases of human infection with avian influenza A (H7N9). Since then, the government has maintained close liaison with the relevant authorities in the Mainland to assess the development of the disease and discuss the response measures required to ensure the safety of live poultry and poultry products supplied to Hong Kong and to safeguard public health. On top of the safeguards and monitoring already in place, the government has stepped up surveillance against H7N9 and taken additional preventive measures. These include (a) taking additional faecal and drinking water samples at live poultry retail outlets to test for H1 to H16 virus; (b) stepping up inspection of live poultry retail outlets to ensure compliance with the special licensing or tenancy conditions on AI control; (c) cleansing of common parts of FEHD markets with disinfectant three times daily; (d) daily cleansing of live poultry market stalls after business hours, followed by another thorough cleansing and disinfection by FEHD contractors; (e) maintaining the cleanliness of market stalls' ventilating systems; and (f) stepping up inspection, washing and disinfection of public places where wild birds gather and taking stringent enforcement action against feeding of wild birds in public places.

Starting from 11 April 2013, the CFS collects tissue swabs from 30 poultry in each consignment of live poultry imported from the Mainland for testing for influenza A, covering both H5 and H7 AI (PCR test). More than 13,300 swabs from imported poultry were tested in 2013, with negative results for either H5 or H7 AI. Chickens raised in local farms were also subject to PCR tests and all samples tested negative for H5 or H7 AI.

In 2013, the government temporarily suspended the importation of live poultry or poultry products from those places in the Mainland and overseas with reported AI outbreaks.

On 2 December, a patient was confirmed to have contracted influenza A (H7N9), the first human infection case in Hong Kong. As she had travel and poultry contact history in Shenzhen, as an exceptional and precautionary measure, the government suspended the import of live poultry from Shenzhen from 3 December 2013 until 24 January 2014.

Control of Animal Diseases

As Hong Kong's inspection and quarantine authority for animals, the AFCD regulates cross-boundary animal movements to prevent animal diseases from entering the city. The AFCD also assesses the risk of disease in imported animals and animal products on the basis of their species, intended use and the disease status of the place of origin. The AFCD explains Hong Kong's import requirements to overseas veterinary authorities when necessary.

In 2013, some 6,200 permits were issued for animal imports, which included dogs, cats, horses, reptiles, birds, zoo animals and food animals such as pigs and cattle.

Quarantine Detector Dog Programme

The Quarantine Detector Dog Programme was introduced to help combat illegal importation of animals. The dogs are trained to detect live mammals, birds, reptiles and animal products hidden in luggage or under layers of clothing. These dogs are deployed to various boundary control points including Lok Ma Chau, Shenzhen Bay and the Hong Kong International Airport. In 2013, more than 280,000 travellers, 1,400 vehicles and 40,000 parcels were screened.

Animal Management

The AFCD adopts various animal management measures to control animal diseases, regulate the trading of animals, and promote respect and care for animals.

Hong Kong has been rabies-free since the 1980s. In 2013, some 61,000 dogs were licensed and vaccinated against rabies. About 7,500 stray dogs and 3,300 stray cats were brought to the AFCD Animal Management Centres during the year, including some surrendered by their owners. The AFCD runs a re-homing programme for the healthy and well-tempered ones.

All pet shops selling animals must be licensed by the AFCD which inspects these shops regularly to ensure that they do not contravene any of the licence conditions. Pet shops are required to obtain dogs for sale only from approved sources. The AFCD runs a programme to promote respect and care for animals. It uses a broad range of communication tools to drive home the message. In 2013, 60 educational talks and 23 thematic exhibitions, roving exhibitions and carnivals were held to promote responsible pet ownership and rabies prevention.

Animal Welfare

The AFCD collaborates with 12 animal welfare organisations (AWOs) in providing animal re-homing services, covering dogs, cats, rabbits, birds and reptiles. The AFCD provides support to its partner organisations in the re-homing of animals, including inviting AWOs to join forces with the AFCD in holding 'Animal Adoption Day' activities and providing free de-sexing services for animals re-homed through the partner organisations.

To improve the handling of animal cruelty reports or complaints, an inter-departmental special working group was set up involving the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and government departments, including the Hong Kong Police Force, the FEHD and the AFCD, to examine the government's work on handling animal cruelty cases, devise guidelines and to ensure that animal welfare is well protected. The AFCD has enhanced its co-operation with AWOs through expanding the membership of the Animal Welfare Advisory Group (AWAG) and co-opting more representatives of AWOs to the various working groups under AWAG.

The AFCD conducted a public consultation exercise in 2012 on proposals to better regulate pet trading. These include tightening regulation of persons who breed and sell dogs with a licensing scheme; increasing penalties under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Animal Trader) Regulations; and empowering the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation to revoke animal trader licences under certain circumstances. In April 2013, the AFCD reported on the outcome of the consultation to the Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and

Environmental Hygiene and subsequently held meetings and discussions with representatives of animal welfare groups and the pet trading and breeding trade. The government is considering all views carefully to ensure that the proposed regulatory system is practicable and effective in protecting the welfare of animals.

Primary Production

Hong Kong's agriculture and fisheries industries are relatively small and receive no government subsidies, but the government assists them in improving the quality of their output, their productivity and competitiveness. In 2013, the combined output of the two industries, which directly employed some 16,580 people, was \$3.28 billion. Vegetables accounted for 2 per cent of local consumption; cut flowers, 27 per cent; live pigs, 7 per cent; live poultry, 60 per cent; freshwater fish, 3 per cent; and local seafood, 28 per cent.

Agricultural Industry

Hong Kong's agricultural industry focuses mainly on producing good quality fresh food crops through intensive land use. About 1 per cent of New Territories land (where most farming is done) is used for growing crops, comprising mainly vegetables and cut flowers, with a combined output in 2013 valued at about \$256 million. Pigs and poultry are the principal food animals reared. In 2013, locally reared pigs earned about \$273 million, while poultry, including chickens and eggs, earned about \$247 million.

The AFCD encourages crop farmers to tap niche markets and to sharpen their competitiveness by cultivating safe and good quality vegetables. The department works with local organic farming groups and the Vegetable Marketing Organisation (VMO) to promote organic farming and to develop a market for organic vegetables. The department provides an organic farming support service to 224 farms located on about 89 hectares of land. The AFCD also promotes the use of greenhouse technology for intensive high-value crop production. During 2013, four improved varieties of vegetable and fruit (long green pepper, green pak choi, orange-yellow flesh watermelon, and non-netted melon) were introduced to farmers for cultivation in Hong Kong.

The AFCD and the VMO have managed the voluntary Accredited Farm Scheme since 1994 with the aim of providing a stable supply of high quality and safe vegetables. As at the end of 2013, 297 farms in Hong Kong, Guangdong and Ningxia Autonomous Region, spreading over 2,759 hectares of land, have been accredited under the scheme.

Leisure farms have become popular places for recreation in recent years. In collaboration with the local agricultural sector, the AFCD published a Guide to Hong Kong Leisure Farms 2013 and created a website (http://fedvmcs.org/farm_index.php) to help showcase a variety of leisure farms in Hong Kong to visitors.

Fisheries Industry

Fresh fish is one of Hong Kong's most important primary products. In 2013, fish caught and fish reared in ponds and floating cages at sea amounted to about 173,500 tonnes with a value of \$2.5 billion.

Hong Kong's fishing fleet consists of some 3,980 vessels, manned by about 8,800 local fishermen and some 4,800 Mainland deckhands. These include larger vessels mainly operating in the South China Sea, and smaller vessels in local waters. The total catch in 2013 weighed 170,129 tonnes and had an estimated wholesale value of \$2.34 billion. The industry provided some 45,000 tonnes of fish for local consumption during the year.

Licensed by the AFCD, 987 mariculturists operate in 26 designated fish culture zones, supplying the market in 2013 with about 1,005 tonnes of live marine fish valued at \$94 million.

Freshwater and brackish water fish are reared in fish ponds located mainly in the northwestern part of the New Territories. In 2013, pond fish culture yielded some 2,187 tonnes of fish, or 3 per cent of local freshwater fish consumption.

The AFCD combats destructive fishing practices to ensure sustainable development of the fishing industry and to conserve fisheries resources in Hong Kong waters. Twelve cases of illegal fishing were successfully prosecuted in 2013.

The AFCD assists the industry in various ways to cope with the challenges it faces, including providing credit facilities for fishermen and owners of fish collectors to switch to sustainable fisheries, or to reduce fuel consumption or the carbon footprint of their operations, and for fish farmers to improve their aquaculture business. Free training courses were also offered to fishermen during the annual fishing moratorium and at Chinese New Year in 2013. A \$500 million Sustainable Fisheries Development Fund will be set up in 2014 to help fishermen adopt sustainable and high value-added methods of operation, and subsidise programmes and research to enhance the overall competitiveness of the industry.

Legislation to ban trawling in Hong Kong waters came into effect on 31 December 2012 as an integral part of efforts to restore Hong Kong's damaged seabed and depleted fisheries resources. One-off assistance was provided to affected trawler owners and their local deckhands. Owners of trawlers and fish collectors who are affected may also apply for a one-off, low interest loan to help them meet the challenges brought about by the trawling ban, and in 2013 the AFCD approved some 30 such applications.

In 2012, amendments to the Fisheries Protection Ordinance introduced a series of measures to control fishing activities in Hong Kong waters and conserve fisheries resources, including (a) setting up a registration system for local fishing vessels; (b) limiting new entrants to control the number of fishing vessels and fishing; (c) restricting the fishing activities of non-fishing vessels in Hong Kong waters and prohibiting fishing by non-local fishing vessels; and (d) designating fisheries protection areas. By December 2013, 3,012 certificates for registration of fishing vessels had been issued.

Following a review of the moratorium on the issue of new fish culture licences and raft area extensions and on the designation of new fish culture zones, the AFCD plans to issue up to 30 new marine fish culture licences under a trial scheme in three zones with surplus carrying capacity. The AFCD also plans to expand the area of one existing fish culture zone, allowing the existing rafts to be spread out to improve the culture environment, and to identify suitable sites for possible designation of new fish culture zones.

The AFCD conducts studies and provides technical services to fish farmers to help the sustainable development of the aquacultural industry. To enhance productivity, the department continues to implement a fish health management programme that helps fish farmers prevent, diagnose and contain fish disease. AFCD staff visit fish farms regularly under the AFCD's 'Good Aquaculture Practices Programme' to collect water and fish samples for analysis. Seminars are held for farmers to learn new techniques and good management practices. A total of 112 farms have joined the AFCD's voluntary 'Accredited Fish Farm Scheme'. To get accredited, farms must adopt good practices that raise their hygiene standards and fish quality. Tests, including analysis of drug residues and heavy metals in fish, are conducted to ensure that the cultured fish are fit for consumption. Over 14,000 kilograms of accredited fish of various species were sold under the scheme in 2013. The accredited fish carry tags for easy recognition.

Specially designed artificial reefs known as biofilters are used to improve water quality and seabed conditions at the fish culture zones at Kau Sai, Sham Wan and Lo Tik Wan. Alternative designs of biofilters are being explored to suit the conditions of different fish culture zones.

To meet public demand for recreational fishing facilities and to help mariculturists diversify their business, in 2013 the AFCD approved applications by some 50 mariculturists in 12 fish culture zones to operate recreational fishing businesses on licensed fish culture rafts.

To protect the mariculture industry, the department monitors red tides and sends red tide warnings through support groups at the fish culture zones. Warnings are also posted on the AFCD's website and conveyed through press releases. In 2013, eight red tides were recorded in Hong Kong waters.

Wholesale Markets

Fresh food produce is sold in wholesale markets managed by the AFCD, the VMO, the Fish Marketing Organisation (FMO) and the private sector. In 2013, government wholesale markets handled 260,400 tonnes of vegetables, 12,500 tonnes of poultry, 51,600 tonnes of freshwater fish and fish products, 103,700 tonnes of fruit and 68,100 tonnes of eggs with a combined value of \$6.8 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 accommodates markets for freshwater fish, vegetables, fruit and eggs, enabling customers to purchase a wide range of fresh foods under one roof. The AFCD also manages two temporary wholesale markets, one in the North District for fresh vegetables, and another in Cheung Sha Wan, for live poultry.

The VMO is a statutory body governed by the Agricultural Products (Marketing) Ordinance. It provides 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. Surplus income is ploughed back into farming development and scholarships for farmers' children. In 2013, the VMO handled 137,288 tonnes of vegetables valued at \$1,042.9 million.

The FMO is governed by the Marine Fish (Marketing) Ordinance. It provides wholesale marketing services at its seven wholesale markets. Revenue comes from the commission charged on fish sales and from fees charged for the use of market facilities. Surplus earnings are channelled back to the fisheries industry by way of low-interest loans to fishermen, outlay that improves market services and facilities, and training grants and scholarships for the fishermen and their children. During the year, some 44,980 tonnes of marine fish valued at \$2.69 billion were sold through the FMO. The FMO develops fish products at its processing centre to help promote the quality of local products.

Websites

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

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

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