

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 the safety of the wide variety of food available for consumption. The government is committed to maintaining a clean and hygienic living environment and to protecting the public 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 and welfare, 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 supporting the agricultural and fisheries industries and provides farmers and fishermen 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 and welfare 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 herb tea, milk, frozen confections, sushi and sashimi), permits for karaoke establishments and licences for places of public entertainment (such as theatres, cinemas and entertainment machine centres). It also licenses private swimming pools, commercial bathhouses, funeral parlours, undertakers of burials 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 2014, the FEHD issued 8,381 full, provisional and temporary food business licences, 687 permits for restricted foods, 1,519 licences for places of public entertainment, 38 licences for other trades, 1,006 liquor and club liquor licences, and nine 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 64,200 samples of food were taken at import, wholesale and retail points for chemical, microbiological and radiological testing in 2014. The overall satisfaction rate of these tests was 99.8 per cent.

During 2014, about 34,700 vehicles carrying vegetables, and about 42,800 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 2,888,300 live food animals were examined and about 14,700 blood and 55,100 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 2014, the CFS conducted visual checks on 5,080 pre-packaged food products to ensure that they complied with the statutory '1+7' nutrition-labelling requirements and took 501 food samples for chemical analysis to verify the nutrition information and nutrition claims. The overall compliance rate was 98.11 per cent.

The Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulation 2014 was gazetted in June. It mandates nutrition labelling of infant formula, follow-up formula and pre-packaged food for infants and young children under the age of 36 months as well as regulates the nutritional composition of infant formula. The requirements on infant formula will come into operation in December 2015 while those on follow-up formula and pre-packaged food for infants and young children will come into operation in June 2016.

The Pesticide Residues in Food Regulation came into operation on 1 August 2014, providing a legal framework for the control of pesticide residues in food.

Following confirmation of reports that substandard lard products had been imported into Hong Kong from Taiwan, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene issued three Food Safety Orders in September, October and November 2014 under the Food Safety Ordinance to

prohibit the import and supply, as well as mandate recall and proper disposal of relevant oils and related food products made with such oils. During the incident, the CFS kept close contact with Taiwanese authorities and tested samples of food and edible oil to safeguard public health.

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 2014, the overall occupancy rate at these markets was 91.2 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's report is expected in early 2015. The government will then formulate improvement plans for implementation.

Hawkers

The FEHD regulates hawking in Hong Kong. As at the end of 2014, there were 5,905 hawkers carrying out business in licensed fixed-pitch stalls and 442 itinerant hawkers.

Since the launch of the five-year 'Assistance Scheme for Hawkers in Fixed-pitch Hawker Areas' in June 2013 to provide financial assistance to 4,300 hawkers in the 43 fixed-pitch hawker areas to reduce fire risks in hawker areas, the FEHD has worked out relocation plans with all fixed-pitch hawkers whose stalls may obstruct building staircase discharge points or emergency operations, involving about 500 fixed pitches. Including hawker licences surrendered, 56 per cent of the hawker pitches have been vacated.

Up to the end of 2014, the FEHD has received 1,060 applications for relocation and reconstruction grants and 356 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 2014, 41,917 animal health certificates and 7,945 entry permits for local pigs were verified at the slaughterhouses, 52,813 samples of urine and tissue were taken from animals and tested for veterinary drug residues, and 1,710,272 pigs, 18,612 cattle and 5,283 goats were slaughtered.

The FEHD's Intelligence Unit continued to track down vendors selling chilled meat as fresh meat in 2014 and, working with the Customs and Excise Department and the Centre for Food Safety, carried out 20 raids, launched 26 prosecutions and seized 1.36 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. Depending on the conditions, public streets are washed daily or as and when there is a need. Additional cleansing services are provided where necessary to maintain environmental cleanliness and hygiene.

Household waste is collected all year round. In 2014, about 74 per cent of waste collection services were outsourced and about 5,390 tonnes of household waste were collected daily by the FEHD and its contractors.

In 2014, three new public toilets were constructed and 11 public toilets and one aqua privy were refurbished, while 15 aqua privies were converted to flushing toilets. 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 2014, the FEHD issued some 33,570 fixed penalty notices.

Abatement of Sanitary Nuisances

In 2014, the FEHD issued 5,584 Nuisance Notices requiring those responsible to stop sanitary nuisances such as refuse accumulation, dripping air-conditioners and water seepage in private premises, and instituted 91 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. Anti-mosquito teams conducted about 769,000 inspections of likely mosquito breeding spots and eliminated about 49,400 mosquito breeding places during the year.

Following three local cases of dengue fever in October and November 2014, the department deployed additional anti-mosquito teams to sustain year-round mosquito control efforts and also stepped up publicity to remind the public of the importance of mosquito control.

Cemeteries, Crematoria and Columbaria

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

To cater for growing public demand for columbaria, the government has adopted a three-pronged approach: increasing the supply of public niches, promoting 'green burials', and regulating private columbaria.

Twenty-four potential sites in 18 districts have been identified for columbaria development and in 2014, the North District Council and the Eastern District Council were consulted on the sites at Sandy Ridge and Chai Wan respectively. These two sites can provide a total of about 225,000 new niches.

To better utilise existing resources, with effect from January 2014 the arrangements for placing additional sets of ashes into public niches were relaxed.

The government promotes environmentally-friendly and sustainable ways for handling ashes, including scattering them in the FEHD's 11 Gardens of Remembrance or at sea. The FEHD provides a free ferry service for scattering ashes at sea and an Internet Memorial Service for the public to pay tribute to the deceased on the internet.

The Private Columbaria Bill, introduced to the Legislative Council on 25 June 2014, sets out a licensing scheme for private columbaria to ensure their compliance with statutory and government requirements, to enhance consumer protection and to promote the industry's sustainable development. The Legislative Council is currently scrutinising the bill.

Public Education

In 2014, the FEHD's Health Education Exhibition and Resource Centre in Kowloon Park, organised 2,374 health talks for the general public and target groups, including school children and the elderly. A mobile education centre helps disseminate food safety and environmental hygiene messages.

The CFS's Communication Resource Unit in Mong Kok organises food safety programmes and provides technical support to people in the food trade and the public. As of December 2014, 23 food trade associations and 1,818 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 186 health talks on food safety during the year and deployed two vans to broadcast food safety messages in housing estates and markets. It also launched a series of food safety promotion activities under the slogan 'Safe and Smart Ways to Cook', promoting good cooking methods to prevent or reduce the formation of harmful substances during the cooking process. The CFS also continued to promote the Nutrition Labelling Scheme and to encourage the public to reduce salt and sugar intake.

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 (H5 and H7) before being

released for sale. Government veterinarians also inspect registered farms in the Mainland to ensure their compliance with the bio-security requirements.

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 animal 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.

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 2014, around 11,200 wild bird carcasses were collected by the AFCD and all tested negative for AI.

Other preventive measures against AI include (a) taking faecal and drinking water samples at live poultry retail outlets to test for AI virus; (b) conducting regular inspections of live poultry retail outlets to ensure compliance with the special licensing or tenancy conditions on AI control; (c) cleansing common parts of FEHD markets with disinfectant three times daily; (d) cleansing live poultry market stalls after business hours daily, followed by another thorough cleansing and disinfection by FEHD contractors; (e) maintaining the cleanliness of market stalls' ventilating systems; and (f) conducting regular inspections, 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 swab samples from 30 poultry in each consignment of live poultry imported from the Mainland for Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing for influenza A, covering both H5 and H7 AI. In 2014, 21,321 samples were taken from imported live poultry for AI testing. Starting from 24 January 2014, H7 serological testing has been introduced to strengthen surveillance against AI.

On 27 January 2014, the government confirmed a number of samples from a batch of imported live chickens tested positive for H7 AI by PCR test. In accordance with the AI contingency plan, the wholesale poultry market was closed and some 22,604 birds were culled.

On 30 December 2014, a number of samples in a consignment of imported live poultry were confirmed positive for H7 AI by PCR test. The wholesale poultry market was closed and some 19,000 birds were culled in accordance with the contingency plan.

The two incidents show that the testing system achieved what it is designed to do: to reduce the risk of poultry infected with AI from entering the retail markets.

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 for animals and animal products to overseas veterinary authorities when necessary.

In 2014, 6,926 permits were issued for animal imports, which included dogs, cats, horses, reptiles, birds, zoo animals and live 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 2014, more than 240,000 travellers, 1,400 vehicles and 32,000 parcels and pieces of luggage 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 2014, some 62,000 dogs were licensed and vaccinated against rabies. About 5,100 stray dogs and 1,900 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 2014, 42 educational talks and 48 thematic exhibitions, roving exhibitions and carnivals were held to promote responsible pet ownership and rabies prevention.

Animal Welfare

The AFCD collaborates with 13 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 government is working on proposed amendments to the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Animal Trader) Regulations to strengthen regulation of pet trading to better protect animal welfare. The legislative proposals include tightening regulation of persons who breed and sell dogs with a new licensing scheme; increasing the relevant penalties under the law; and empowering the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation to revoke animal trader licences under certain circumstances.

Primary Production

Hong Kong's agriculture and fisheries industries are relatively small. The government assists them in improving the quality of their output, their productivity and competitiveness. In 2014, the combined output of the two industries, which directly employed some 17,000 people, was \$3.53 billion. Vegetables accounted for 2 per cent of local consumption; cut flowers, 29 per cent; live pigs, 5 per cent; live poultry, 80 per cent; freshwater fish, 2 per cent; and local seafood, 32 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 2014 valued at about \$277 million. Pigs and poultry are the principal food animals reared. In 2014, locally reared pigs earned about \$247 million, while poultry, including chickens and eggs, earned about \$306 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 248 farms located on about 96 hectares of land. The AFCD also promotes the use of greenhouse technology for intensive high-value crop production. During 2014, three

improved varieties of vegetable and fruit (watercress, papaya and milk pak choi) 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 2014, 305 farms in Hong Kong, Guangdong and Ningxia Autonomous Region, spreading over 3,012 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's *Guide to Hong Kong Leisure Farms 2014* and the Federation of Vegetable Marketing Co-operative Societies' website help showcase a variety of leisure farms in Hong Kong to visitors.

Following an undertaking in the 2014 Policy Address to review, and consult on, agricultural policy, the government released for public consultation 'The New Agricultural Policy: Sustainable Agricultural Development in Hong Kong' on 29 December 2014, seeking public views on a more proactive approach towards the modernisation and sustainable development of local agriculture. The public consultation will run until the end of March 2015.

Fisheries Industry

Fresh fish is one of Hong Kong's most important primary products. In 2014, fish caught and fish reared in ponds and floating cages at sea amounted to about 164,200 tonnes with a value of \$2.7 billion.

Hong Kong's fishing fleet consists of some 4,540 vessels, manned by about 9,400 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 2014 weighed 160,789 tonnes and had an estimated wholesale value of \$2.53 billion. The industry provided some 66,000 tonnes of fish for local consumption during the year.

Licensed by the AFCD, 968 mariculturists operate in 26 designated fish culture zones, supplying the market in 2014 with about 1,255 tonnes of live marine fish valued at \$115 million.

Freshwater and brackish water fish are reared in fish ponds located mainly in the northwestern part of the New Territories. In 2014, pond fish culture yielded some 2,001 tonnes of fish, or 2 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. Fourteen cases of illegal fishing were successfully prosecuted in 2014.

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 2014. A \$500

million Sustainable Fisheries Development Fund was 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, their local deckhands and affected fish collectors.

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 2014, 3,741 certificates for registration of fishing vessels had been issued, 729 of these in 2014.

The AFCD conducts studies and provides technical support 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 116 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. Analyses of drug residues and heavy metals in fish are conducted to ensure that the cultured fish are fit for consumption. Over 21,000 kilograms of accredited fish of various species were sold under the scheme in 2014. 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, some 50 mariculturists in 12 fish culture zones are currently approved by AFCD to operate recreational fishing businesses on licensed fish culture rafts.

To protect the mariculture industry, the department monitors red tides and issues red tide alerts through support groups at the fish culture zones. Alerts are also posted on the AFCD's website and conveyed through press releases. In 2014, 23 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 2014, government wholesale markets handled 256,200 tonnes of vegetables, 9,700 tonnes of poultry, 53,400 tonnes of freshwater fish

and fish products, 102,000 tonnes of fruit and 72,900 tonnes of eggs with a combined value of \$6.9 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 2014, the VMO handled 129,164 tonnes of vegetables valued at \$967 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 45,430 tonnes of marine fish valued at \$2.93 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

Internet Memorial Service: www.memorial.gov.hk