

Chapter 10

Food Safety, Environmental Hygiene, Agriculture and Fisheries

With more than 90 per cent of its food imported, Hong Kong devotes considerable efforts to ensuring the safety of the wide variety of food available for sale. The government's policy is to maintain a clean and hygienic living environment and to protect the public from threats of zoonotic disease.

The Food and Health Bureau draws up policies on food safety, environmental hygiene, animal welfare, agriculture and fisheries, and allocates resources to execute these policies. It works closely with the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and Government Laboratory.

The FEHD ensures 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, provides farmers and fishermen with infrastructural and technical support, and administers loans and funding schemes to support the industries' sustainable development. The department also oversees quarantine and animal welfare matters.

The Government Laboratory provides testing services to support the routine food surveillance programme of the FEHD's Centre for Food Safety and helps the centre handle food safety incidents.

Licensing of Food Premises and Other Trades

The FEHD is the licensing authority for food businesses. It issues licences for food businesses and permits for the sale of restricted foods. It also issues permits for karaoke establishments in licensed restaurants and licences for places of public entertainment, private swimming pools, commercial bathhouses, funeral parlours, undertakers of burials and offensive trades. It provides executive and secretarial support to the Liquor Licensing Board, an independent statutory body that issues liquor licences, including those for clubs.

During 2021, the department issued 7,844 full, provisional and temporary food business licences; 2,529 permits for the sale of restricted foods, including 1,041 online restricted food permits; 1,931 licences for places of public entertainment; 32 licences for other trades; 1,395 liquor and club liquor licences; and seven permits for karaoke establishments in licensed restaurants.

Food Safety

The Centre for Food Safety guards the safety of food sold in Hong Kong. It tested about 66,300 samples of food at import, wholesale and retail levels for chemical, microbiological and radiological examination in 2021. The overall satisfaction rate of these tests was 99.9 per cent. The Government Laboratory is responsible for most of the testing of food samples.

During the year, the Man Kam To Animal Inspection Station inspected 22,665 vehicles carrying live food animals including pigs, cattle and goats, and examined 806,796 live food animals.

The bureau and the centre, making reference to the food safety standards of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and other economies and the recommendation of the World Health Organisation, and taking into account local dietary practices and risk assessment results, update Hong Kong's food safety standards and regulatory arrangements in a timely manner based on scientific evidence. The Harmful Substances in Food (Amendment) Regulation 2021 was passed during the year to enhance the regulation of certain harmful substances, such as mycotoxins in food. The government has also specified partially hydrogenated oils, the main source of industrially produced trans-fatty acids, as a prohibited substance in food under the amendment. The relevant provisions will come into operation in 2023.

Public Markets and Cooked Food Markets

The FEHD operates 97 public markets, including 23 free-standing cooked food markets. There are some 14,000 stalls mainly selling fresh provisions, cooked food, light refreshments and household items. As at end-2021, the overall occupancy rate at these markets was 88 per cent.

Seven new public market projects are at different stages of planning. They are the development of new public markets in Tin Shui Wai, Tung Chung Town Centre, Tseung Kwan O, Kwu Tung North New Development Area, Tung Chung New Town Extension and Hung Shui Kiu/Ha Tsuen New Development Area, as well as the establishment of a temporary market in Tung Chung Town Centre.

The FEHD is taking forward the pioneering project of the Market Modernisation Programme – the overhaul of Aberdeen Market. The work began in November and is expected to be completed within 2022. The department is also carrying out the preparatory and consultation work for the proposed overhaul works for some other markets. In addition, the FEHD has carried out minor refurbishment or improvement works in 11 markets, nine of which were completed in 2021.

Hawkers

The FEHD regulates hawking in Hong Kong. As at end-2021, there were 5,268 licensed fixed-pitch hawkers and 330 licensed itinerant hawkers.

The department invited applications in 2019 for allocation of 435 vacant hawker pitches. By September 2021, 431 new hawker licences had been issued to successful applicants.

Slaughterhouses

The FEHD oversees the hygiene standards of licensed slaughterhouses in Sheung Shui and Tsuen Wan. Meat supplied by the slaughterhouses has to pass inspection before delivery to markets. During the year, 22,665 movement permits for imported livestock and 10,225 entry permits for local pigs were handled at the slaughterhouses, 30,131 samples were taken from food animals for testing of veterinary drug residues, and 900,737 pigs, 13,480 head of cattle and 1,714 goats were slaughtered.

Public Cleansing Services

The FEHD provides street cleansing services, household waste collection services and public toilets. All streets are swept one to eight times a day and are washed regularly, from daily to fortnightly or whenever the need arises, depending on the conditions of individual locations. The department also deploys mechanical sweepers to sweep flyovers and highways.

Household waste is collected all year round. In 2021, about 6,130 tonnes of household waste were collected daily by the department and its contractors, of which 79 per cent was collected by the latter.

Toilet attendant services are provided at heavily used public toilets. To improve the hygiene of public toilets and the quality of their management and services, the FEHD has introduced several trial schemes that make use of technology, such as a smart toilet system, nano plasma driven catalysis air purification technology, nano confined catalytic oxidation technology and ozone technology. The department has also been implementing the Enhanced Public Toilet Refurbishment Programme. In 2021, 57 public toilets were refurbished, of which six were at major tourist spots.

The department takes enforcement action against littering, spitting and other unhygienic practices in public places. In 2021, some 50,900 fixed penalty notices were issued. To support enforcement action against fly-tippers, internet protocol cameras have been installed at illegal refuse deposit black spots, greatly improving hygiene conditions. As at end-2021, such cameras were installed at about 275 illegal refuse dumping black spots.

To enhance public cleansing services through technology, the department has launched trial schemes using mechanised and automatic cleansing technology and equipment such as solar-powered compacting refuse bins and mini mechanised street sweepers.

Abatement of Sanitary Nuisances

The FEHD issues nuisance notices requiring those responsible to stop sanitary nuisances arising from refuse accumulation, dripping air conditioners and water seepage on private premises. In 2021, it issued 9,017 such notices and secured 328 convictions against those who failed to comply with the notices.

Pest Control

Preventing vector-borne diseases is one of the FEHD's important tasks. In 2021, the department's anti-mosquito teams conducted 848,281 inspections of likely mosquito breeding spots and eliminated 72,012 breeding places. No local case of dengue fever was recorded during the year.

On rodent prevention and control, the department conducts two phases of territory-wide operations and two further rounds in targeted areas, as well as deploying a thermal camera monitoring system in suitable locations, in order to strengthen rodent disinfestation and control at the district level. In 2021, the department filled 17,840 rat holes, collected 33,336 dead rodents, caught 33,846 live rodents and handled 11,102 complaints.

Cemeteries, Crematoria and Columbaria

The FEHD manages six government crematoria, 10 public cemeteries, 13 gardens of remembrance and 11 public columbaria, and monitors the management of 27 private cemeteries. The department also promotes green burial and seeks to increase the supply of public niches, allocating about 21,000 niches in 2021.

Under the Private Columbaria Ordinance, a specified instrument, namely a licence, an exemption or a temporary suspension of liability, must be obtained to operate a private columbarium.

The Private Columbaria Licensing Board regulates the operation and management of private columbaria, and handles applications for specified instruments. As at end-2021, it had approved eight licence applications and one exemption application; given approvals in principle for one licence application, one exemption application and 30 temporary suspension of liability applications; and refused applications for specified instruments from 29 private columbaria. During the year, the FEHD carried out about 390 inspections of private columbaria and investigated about 60 cases of suspected contravention of the ordinance.

Public Education

In 2021, the FEHD's Health Education Exhibition and Resource Centre in Kowloon Park organised around 800 health talks. There was also a mobile education centre disseminating food safety and environmental hygiene messages across the territory.

The Centre for Food Safety held its annual Food Safety Day in June, with the theme 'Know Your High-risk Foods'.

Guarding against African Swine Fever

While African swine fever is not a zoonotic disease and poses no food safety risk, it can cause widespread deaths among pigs within a short time. Biosecurity is enhanced at pig farms, boundary checkpoints and slaughterhouses to minimise the transmission risk of the disease.

A surveillance programme for wild pig carcasses, launched by the AFCD in collaboration with the FEHD in 2019, monitors epidemiology in the local wild pig population. In 2021, the AFCD tested 25 wild pig carcasses and 114 wild pig blood samples for African swine fever, and found only one carcass carrying the virus.

In February, an outbreak on a local pig farm was reported, resulting in the culling of all 4,000 or so pigs there. The farm conducted several rounds of thorough cleansing and disinfection under AFCD supervision, followed by a destocking period and the introduction of a small number of pigs to detect any potential residue of the virus. The farm was then allowed to start restocking of pigs from mid-May. The AFCD also stepped up monitoring at all local pig farms.

Measures against Avian Influenza

Government measures to keep avian influenza at bay include stringent monitoring of the poultry supply chain from farm to retail levels, compulsory vaccination of chickens against the H5 and H7 avian influenza viruses and the close surveillance of imported and local birds.

Samples are collected regularly for testing from poultry farms, wholesale markets and retail outlets; from birds kept in recreation parks and pet shops; and from wild birds in wetlands and elsewhere. The government provides a round-the-clock service for the collection of sick and dead wild birds and poultry. In 2021, the AFCD collected 8,818 wild bird and poultry carcasses and found two of them carrying the highly pathogenic H5 virus.

Other preventive measures include inspecting live poultry retail outlets to ensure compliance with special licensing or tenancy conditions on avian influenza control; maintaining the cleanliness and hygiene of market stalls and ventilation systems; conducting inspections, washing and disinfection of public places where wild birds gather; and taking stringent enforcement action against the feeding of wild birds in public places.

The measures are effective in preventing human infection of avian influenza, as evidenced by the total absence of locally infected human case of the H5 or H7 viruses since the first avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong in 1997.

Antimicrobial Resistance

The Hong Kong Strategy and Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (2017-22) tackles the increasing threat of antimicrobial resistance to public health. The plan details AFCD measures in the food animal production sector, including livestock and fish, to alleviate the development of antimicrobial resistance and safeguard animal and public health.

The AFCD inspects food animal farms to collect data and samples to evaluate antimicrobial usage, as well as biological samples for bacterial culture and antimicrobial sensitivity testing on

a regular basis. The data helps the department identify control points and devise appropriate control measures.

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 territory. The department also assesses the risk of disease in imported animals and animal products on the basis of their species, the intended use and the disease status of the place of origin, and formulates quarantine measures to control the import of animals and animal products.

In 2021, about 4,800 permits were issued for animal imports, which included dogs, cats, horses, birds, zoo animals and live food animals such as pigs and cattle.

Quarantine Detector Dog Programme

The Quarantine Detector Dog Programme helps combat the illegal import of animals. The dogs are trained to detect live animals and animal products hidden in luggage at land boundary control points, Hong Kong International Airport and the airport's Air Mail Centre. In 2021, more than 3,300 travellers, 520 vehicles and 7,900 parcels and pieces of luggage were screened.

Animal Welfare and Management

The government's approach towards animal welfare and management includes strengthening public education, controlling animal trading properly, fostering close partnerships with animal welfare organisations, managing stray animals properly, and handling and preventing acts of animal cruelty.

Through promoting responsible pet ownership and animal welfare, the AFCD encourages the public to care for and respect animals. To achieve this, educational talks, roving exhibitions and dog training courses are conducted alongside advertisements on different media platforms.

The department partners with 17 animal welfare organisations to rehome dogs, cats, rabbits, birds and reptiles. It provides free desexing for the rehomed animals, and subvents these organisations in carrying out animal welfare and management projects.

Under a cooperation mechanism established between the police, AFCD and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), the police may invite AFCD and SPCA officers to provide professional advice and assistance at the scene of an animal cruelty case where necessary. AFCD and SPCA officers also give talks on the multi-agency approach for investigating animal cruelty cases to enhance frontline police officers' professional knowledge in handling such cases.

The AFCD inspects licensed pet shops to ensure compliance with the licensing conditions. Pet shops are required to obtain dogs for sale only from approved sources. Dog breeders and sellers are regulated under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Trading and Breeding) Regulations.

Following public consultation in 2019 on its proposals to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance to further safeguard animal welfare, the government is now working on the introduction of legislative amendments which include imposing a positive duty of care on persons responsible for animals and enhancing the provisions for prevention of animal cruelty. In 2021, the government amended the Road Traffic Ordinance to require drivers to stop their vehicle if they hit a cat or a dog, whether stray or owned, in a traffic accident, so that the injured animal may receive timely medical treatment.

From 1 September, the scope of exemptions under the Veterinary Surgeons Registration Ordinance was expanded to allow veterinary students to perform a wider variety of veterinary surgery acts under suitable supervision as part of their clinical training.

Primary Production

Hong Kong's agricultural and fisheries industries are relatively small in scale. The government helps improve their output quality, productivity and competitiveness. The two industries combined employed some 18,100 people directly and produced \$4.27 billion of output during the year. Live poultry accounted for 100 per cent of local consumption; cut flowers, 35 per cent; seafood, 18 per cent; live pigs, 12 per cent; freshwater fish, 5 per cent; and vegetables, 1.6 per cent.

Agricultural Industry

The agricultural industry focuses mainly on producing quality fresh food crops through intensive land use. Most farming is in the New Territories and for growing crops, comprising mainly vegetables and cut flowers, with a combined output in 2021 valued at about \$382 million. The principal food animals reared are pigs and poultry, which respectively yielded earnings of about \$600 million and about \$402 million, inclusive of eggs.

The AFCD encourages crop farmers to tap niche markets and sharpen their competitiveness by cultivating safe and quality vegetables. To promote organic farming, the department provides organic farming support to 334 farms occupying 102 hectares of land. It also promotes the use of greenhouse technology for intensive high-value crop production.

The department manages a voluntary Accredited Farm Scheme jointly with a statutory body, the Vegetable Marketing Organisation (VMO), to provide a stable supply of quality and safe vegetables. A total of 315 farms in Hong Kong, Guangdong Province and Ningxia Autonomous Region, occupying 2,573 hectares of land, are accredited under the scheme.

The Controlled Environment Hydroponic Research and Development Centre, a joint set-up between the AFCD and VMO at Cheung Sha Wan Wholesale Vegetable Market, studies the application of state-of-the-art hydroponic cultivation techniques to the agricultural sector to enhance the output of local vegetable production.

Leisure farms are popular places for recreation. The department works with the agricultural sector to provide updated information about these farms on a mobile application, Hong Kong Leisure Farms.

Under the New Agriculture Policy, the government promotes the modernisation and sustainable development of local agriculture. The \$500 million Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund was set up to enhance the industry's overall competitiveness. The first phase of an agricultural park at Kwu Tung South will be completed in phases from the second quarter of 2022. A consultancy study is also being conducted on the feasibility of designating agricultural priority areas.

Fisheries Industry

Fresh fish is one of Hong Kong's most important primary products. In 2021, the amount of fish caught and fish reared in ponds and floating cages at sea totalled about 115,200 tonnes, with a value of \$2.9 billion.

As at 31 December, some 6,376 vessels were licensed as Class III vessels, meaning fishing vessels, under the Merchant Shipping (Local Vessels) (Certification and Licensing) Regulation. These included larger vessels operating mainly in the South China Sea and smaller vessels in local waters. There were about 10,510 local fishermen in the industry, with a quota of 4,005 Mainland deckhands. The total catch weighed about 111,800 tonnes, with an estimated wholesale value of \$2.8 billion, and provided some 37,000 tonnes of fish for local consumption.

As at the year end, 920 AFCD-licensed mariculturists were operating in 26 designated fish culture zones. They supplied consumers with some 332 tonnes of live marine fish valued at \$34 million during the year.

Freshwater and brackish water fish are reared in fish ponds located mainly in the northwestern New Territories. In 2021, pond fish culture yielded some 2,926 tonnes of fish, valued at \$73 million.

The AFCD combats illegal fishing practices, including trawling, to ensure the sustainable development of the industry and to conserve fisheries resources in Hong Kong waters. In 2021, there were 12 convicted cases of illegal fishing.

At the same time, the department helps the industry cope with challenges, including providing credit facilities to fishermen, owners of fish-collecting vessels and fish farmers for sustainable development and general productive purposes. It offers free training courses to fishermen. The \$500 million Sustainable Fisheries Development Fund helps fishermen adopt sustainable and high value-added methods of operation, and subsidises programmes and research to enhance the industry's competitiveness.

The voluntary Accredited Fish Farm Scheme tags fish from 146 participating farms for easy recognition. More than 65,000 kilograms of accredited fish were sold under the scheme in 2021.

To help the industry adopt modern and sustainable aquaculture, the AFCD has established a demonstration mariculture farm as a training centre at the Tung Lung Chau fish culture zone. The centre provides practical training using the latest aquaculture equipment to help fish farmers learn new aquaculture techniques.

The AFCD plans to designate new fish culture zones at Wong Chuk Kok Hoi, Outer Tap Mun, Mirs Bay and Po Toi and has commissioned consultants to undertake the necessary environmental impact assessments for these zones.

To meet public demand for recreational fishing and to help mariculturists diversify their business, 71 mariculturists in 11 fish culture zones have the department's approval to operate recreational fishing businesses on licensed fish culture rafts.

Eleven red tides were recorded in Hong Kong waters in 2021. The AFCD is testing the Real-time Phytoplankton Species Monitoring System to improve early warning of red tides.

Wholesale Markets

Fresh food produce is sold in wholesale markets managed by the AFCD, VMO, Fish Marketing Organisation (FMO) and private sector. In 2021, government wholesale markets, namely the Western Wholesale Food Market, Cheung Sha Wan Wholesale Food Market, Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market and North District Temporary Wholesale Market for Agricultural Products, handled 238,229 tonnes of vegetables, 68,370 tonnes of fruit, 67,214 tonnes of eggs, 47,313 tonnes of freshwater fish and fish products and 7,933 tonnes of poultry, with a combined value of \$6.87 billion.

The VMO provides farmers and traders with wholesale marketing services, including trading facilities, transport and pesticide residue tests. In 2021, the VMO handled 68,534 tonnes of vegetables valued at \$631 million.

The FMO provides wholesale marketing services at its seven wholesale markets. In 2021, some 39,850 tonnes of marine fish valued at \$3.1 billion were sold through the FMO. The organisation also develops fish products at its processing centre to promote the quality of local products. The FMO and VMO have collaborated to launch the Local Fresh app, enabling customers to purchase local fish products online, and operate a store promoting premium local fish 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