

# LCQ1: Anti-epidemic measures targeting at imported frozen goods

Following is a question by the Hon Wong Ting-kwong and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 6):

Question:

It has been reported that the coronavirus which is currently rampant across the globe can survive for several days at low temperatures. In recent months, cases have been recorded from time to time on the Mainland in which the packages of imported frozen foods were tested positive for the virus, and some workers were infected with the virus suspectedly due to coming into contact with such kind of goods or the conveyances concerned, who then spread the epidemic to the community. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the additional measures put in place to prevent the coronavirus from being spread to Hong Kong via imported containers and frozen goods (especially those coming from those regions or countries where the epidemic was severe);

(2) of the additional measures put in place to help prevent workers who need to come into contact with imported frozen goods from being infected; and

(3) whether it has regularly conducted coronavirus tests on the retail shops for and conveyances of imported frozen goods, as well as the workers handling such goods; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Adhering to the strategy of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community" with respect to COVID-19, we have implemented, apart from immigration control, virus testing and social distancing, a series of preventive measures including those safeguarding against the risk of virus transmission through imported frozen foods and other goods. The following is my consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Wong Ting-kwong:

On preventing the importation of the virus through imported frozen foods, noting the earlier cases in the Mainland that the COVID-19 virus was detected on imported frozen foods or their packaging, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has immediately stepped up, at the import level, testing of various types of frozen foods and their packaging imported from different countries/regions,

which involves taking samples at its Airport Food Inspection Offices and the cold stores of importers. As at the end of 2020, over 1 300 related food samples were collected for testing. The test results were all negative. The CFS will continue the surveillance on imported frozen foods and their packaging to closely monitor the risk of the spread of the COVID-19 virus through imported frozen foods. Moreover, arrangements are being made with the relevant departments to extend the virus surveillance to other frozen goods and their packaging.

In the meantime, the FEHD has arranged voluntary free COVID-19 testing service for various targeted groups since July 2020. The testing service has been extended to practitioners of licensed cold stores since November 2020. As at the end of December 2020, over 2 200 practitioners of licensed cold stores participated in the COVID-19 testing scheme with all tested to be negative. The FEHD will continue to provide voluntary and free testing service for practitioners of licensed cold stores. Persons who have undergone the tests are also entitled to be re-tested.

In addition, the Department of Health continues to provide free COVID-19 testing service for staff members of the Hong Kong International Airport, including those working at air cargo terminals who may be in contact with frozen goods. The daily quota has increased from the original 500 to the current 800 starting from January 4, 2021.

Meanwhile, the Transport and Housing Bureau (THB) has been providing voluntary and free COVID-19 tests for front-line workers of the Kwai Tsing Container Terminals who are required to work or contact crews onboard container ships since September 2020. As at the end of December 2020, over 11 600 specimens have been collected and tested. The THB will continue to liaise with terminal operators closely to ensure the smooth operation of the testing scheme.

In consultation with the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health, the CFS issued the "Health Advice for Frozen Food Handlers on the Prevention of COVID-19" (the Advice) to the food trade (including licensed food premises and licensed cold stores) in early November 2020. The Advice was also disseminated to container terminal operators and the cold chain logistics sector to remind frozen food handlers of the potential risks of infection and the need to take precautionary measures, such as good personal hygiene practices, putting on personal protection equipment, and maintaining environmental hygiene and social distancing. The FEHD noted that the trade had actively followed the Advice to put in place measures against the pandemic.

Furthermore, the CFS started to discuss with cold store operators on how to step up the disinfection of the outer package of imported frozen foods and the working environment of cold stores in late November 2020. The major cold store operators have indicated their support. In late December 2020, the CFS issued the "Prevention of COVID-19 – Guidance on Disinfecting the Working Environment and the Food Package of Cold Stores at Import Level" (the Guidance) to licensed cold stores and suggested to them relevant preventive

measures including the type of disinfectants and their usage, precautions for the use of chlorine-based disinfectants and personal protection measures. The Guidance has been distributed to all licensed cold store operators and uploaded to the CFS's dedicated website "Let's Beat COVID-19 Together". The CFS will continue to work with the frozen food trade to enhance anti-epidemic work with regard to imported frozen foods.

At the same time, since the COVID-19 outbreak, three air cargo terminals at the Hong Kong International Airport have adopted a series of measures to safeguard the health and safety of staff members and stepped up the cleaning and disinfection of workplace. The cargo terminal operators will continue to pay heed to the guidelines issued by relevant international organisations and take appropriate steps and measures in handling temperature-controlled cargoes entering Hong Kong.

In fact, the main mode of transmission of COVID-19 is through respiratory droplets. The virus can also be transmitted through contact. Droplets carrying the virus can deposit on objects and surfaces surrounding infected persons. People can be infected if they touch contaminated objects or surfaces (including frozen foods and other frozen goods) and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the virus causing COVID-19 can survive on different objects (including frozen foods and other frozen goods) for a few hours to several days, but cannot multiply. According to the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, in the earlier positive cases of COVID-19 nucleic acid in foods and packages on the Mainland, the load of the nucleic acid was relatively low and the virus present was not necessarily alive.

Practitioners who frequently come into contact with imported frozen foods and other frozen goods should observe personal hygiene and take adequate personal protection measures all the time. The risk of acquiring the virus through contact with frozen goods in daily work is believed to be very low. The WHO also states that it is highly unlikely that people will contract COVID-19 from frozen foods and other frozen goods. Nevertheless, we will continue to closely monitor the risk of the spread of the COVID-19 virus through imported frozen foods and sustain our efforts in enhancing the anti-epidemic work in respect of imported frozen foods and other frozen goods.

Thank you, President.