LCQ13: Food safety of meat products from Taiwan

Following is a question by the Hon Starry Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (June 16):

Question:

Beta-adrenergic agonists (commonly known as "leanness-enhancing agents") may promote growth and muscle leanness in certain food animal species. Some experts have pointed out that human consumption of meat containing an excessive quantity of leanness-enhancing agents on a long-term basis may increase the risk of developing certain diseases. Since January 1 this year, the Taiwan authorities have allowed the import of pork containing ractopamine (a kind of leanness-enhancing agent) from the United States (US). In reply to my relevant question on November 11 last year, the Secretary for Food and Health indicated that the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) would continue to adopt a risk-based approach to take samples of meat products from Taiwan for testing under the routine Food Surveillance Programme. Earlier on, a media organisation reported the results of the sampling tests it conducted on eight pork products from the market, which were manufactured in Taiwan and the US: the ractopamine levels in seven products all exceeded the prescribed limits in Hong Kong (by a maximum of 27.6 times) while three products manufactured in Taiwan and one manufactured in the US were found to contain clenbuterol, a leanness-enhancing agent prohibited in Hong Kong. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of samples of meat products from Taiwan on which the CFS conducted tests for concentration of leanness-enhancing agents from January to May this year, and the results of such tests; how the number and results compare with those of the same period last year; whether the meat products sampled for testing included meatballs, canned minced pork, jerky and meat floss; if not, of the reasons for that;

(2) as the Government indicated in March this year that the samples of meat and related products taken for tests for concentration of leanness-enhancing agents by the CFS from 2017 to 2020 all passed the tests, whether the Government will examine why such results differ significantly from the situation as revealed by the aforesaid report; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether it will, in the light of the aforesaid report, step up the sampling tests on the meat products from Taiwan (including meatballs, canned minced pork, jerky and meat floss) for concentration of leanness-enhancing agents; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether it will, by following the practice on the Mainland and in the

European Union, amend the legislation to impose a total ban on the import of meat and meat products containing leanness-enhancing agents; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

With reference to the standards of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) and most other regions, the prevailing legislation in Hong Kong has prohibited two beta-agonists (commonly known as "leanness-enhancing agents") which may lead to acute food poisoning due to their residues in animal tissues, i.e. clenbuterol and salbutamol, in any meat imported or sold in Hong Kong for human consumption.

Regarding another beta-agonist, ractopamine, as it has a very short half-life in animal blood and can be quickly excreted in urine upon intake, its level of tissue residues in animals is also very low. The Codex has set standards on the safe intake of ractopamine from food for international reference. For cattle and pigs, the maximum residue limits for ractopamine in their muscle, liver and kidney are 10, 40 and 90μg/kg respectively, while that in the fat of cattle and fat with skin of pigs is 10μg/kg. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has also made reference to the said standards and established the same action levels. Ractopamine, if any, contained in all locally produced or imported pork, beef and related products should not exceed the action levels, or else the CFS will take appropriate follow-up actions.

To ensure food safety, the CFS takes food samples at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing on an ongoing basis under its Food Surveillance Programme. In the past three years, the CFS collected about 600 samples of pork, beef and related products for testing of beta-agonists. All samples were tested with satisfactory results. From January to May 2021, the CFS conducted surveillance of beta-agonists in about 70 samples of pork, beef and related products from various countries/regions (including Taiwan). The testing results of all samples were satisfactory. The CFS will continue to conduct relevant food surveillance on a risk-based approach.

We will continue to closely monitor international developments on the safeguarding of food safety, including the latest risk assessment statistics of the Codex and other places on beta-agonists, and review the situation in Hong Kong in a timely manner.