

LCQ2: Safety of food imported from Japan

Following is a question by the Hon Wong Kwok-kin and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 5):

Question:

The Japanese Government announced last month that it would start discharging diluted nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the sea in two years from now. The governments of its neighbouring countries have raised objection one after another, denouncing such a move to be detrimental to the agriculture and fisheries industry and hazardous to human health. Some environmental groups have pointed out that the radioactive substances in the nuclear wastewater such as tritium, strontium, cesium and carbon-14 will seriously affect the marine ecosystem and make their way into the human body through the food chain. Regarding safety of food imported from Japan, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will take follow-up actions in response to the decision of the Japanese Government, including gaining an understanding from it of the details of the arrangements for the discharge of nuclear wastewater, and requesting it to provide samples of the nuclear wastewater for testing of radiation levels, so as to grasp the information needed for formulating corresponding plans; if so, of the details;

(2) whether it will, upon the commencement of the discharge of nuclear wastewater into the sea, immediately and comprehensively enhance the testing of radiation levels of the agricultural and fisheries products imported from Japan; and

(3) given that the import of fruits, vegetables, milk, milk beverages and milk powder produced in Fukushima into Hong Kong is currently prohibited, whether the Government will consider, in light of the latest situation, imposing a blanket import ban on all food items produced in Fukushima and its neighbouring areas when necessary, in order to safeguard public health?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by the Hon Wong Kwok-kin is set out below:

The Japanese Government announced earlier the decision to discharge the wastewater generated in the cooling process of the reactors at the Fukushima nuclear power station into the ocean in about two years' time (i.e. 2023).

The plan has aroused international and public concern. According to the announcement, the nuclear wastewater will be purified and diluted to meet relevant international standards before being discharged.

The Tokyo Electric Power Company will formulate a detailed plan for discharging the wastewater into the ocean. Implementation of the plan, which must be in line with international practices and standards, has to be approved by the Japanese Government first. Besides, the Japanese authorities have indicated that they will closely monitor the impact of the discharge on the environment and the ocean, and will keep the international community and the public notified of necessary information in a transparent manner.

Since the wastewater contains various radionuclides, we understand that many organisations, fishery operators and members of the public are concerned that the discharge of wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power station into the ocean would have serious impact on marine ecosystem, the food chain and food safety. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has expressed grave concern about the impact of the discharge plan on food safety, and has strongly requested the Japanese authorities to provide data from various aspects and information on control and surveillance, including the method and actual location of the wastewater discharge, the list and the concentration of the radionuclides in the wastewater, the frequency and volume of discharge, as well as the monitoring programme on the wastewater treatment and the surrounding environment. The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) have made it clear to the Japanese authorities that they shall provide all relevant information, formulate and promulgate a highly transparent and robust surveillance programme including the measures and locations of monitoring at source, the radionuclides and types of food under surveillance, ways for release of surveillance results and contingency mechanisms, etc., and should not discharge the nuclear wastewater unilaterally without the consensus of the international community.

Currently, the import of vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from Fukushima is still prohibited in Hong Kong. Radiation certificate has to be produced for the import of game, meat, poultry, poultry eggs and aquatic products from Fukushima and its four neighbouring prefectures (i.e. Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Gunma), whereas radiation certificate and exporter certificate are required for the import of vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from the four prefectures. The CFS implemented additional control and surveillance measures in 2011 for food products imported from Japan. Since then, the CFS had tested a total of more than 750 000 samples of such products and none of the samples were found to have radiation levels exceeding the guideline levels of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The CFS will continue to adopt a risk-based principle in conducting radiation tests on Japanese food products under its routine Food Surveillance Programme.

Regarding the Japanese Government's plan to discharge wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power station into the ocean, the HKSAR Government has requested the Japanese authorities to provide data from various aspects and

information on control and surveillance. We will carefully examine the information provided by the Japanese authorities and the assessments made by international expert organisations, etc., and conduct risk assessments with the relevant Government departments as appropriate to determine whether monitoring work on Japanese food should be adjusted accordingly and whether additional measures are required to ensure food safety and safeguard public health. Depending on the circumstances, we will not rule out increasing the tests on Japanese food imports and tightening import control on food products (including fishery and agricultural products) from Fukushima and its neighbouring areas.

It is only through disclosure of all relevant information comprehensively, including the rationale for discharging the wastewater into the ocean, the associated health and ecological risks, intervention measures available, and whether there is a highly transparent surveillance mechanism to ensure effective operation of such measures as well as effective safeguarding of the ecosystem and food safety, that public's doubts and worries arising from the discharge of the wastewater can be eliminated. Otherwise, the confidence of the public in imported Japanese food would be undermined. Hence, the Japanese authorities shall disseminate all information relating to the nuclear wastewater discharge plan of the Fukushima nuclear power station to the international community and the public in a highly transparent manner. It was understood that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has proposed to set up a technical working group to follow up and monitor Japan's discharge of the nuclear wastewater. The China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs remarked that the IAEA has confirmed it would invite experts from China to join the proposed technical working group. We will keep a close watch on the assessments made by relevant international organisations on the discharge plan. The FHB and the CFS have relayed to the Japanese authorities that they should not discharge the wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power station into the ocean unilaterally without the consensus of the international community so as to avoid bringing about irreversible impacts on the environment.

Thank you, President.