

LCQ21: Pork and related products of Taiwan region and United States

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (September 1):

Question:

Since January this year, the authorities of the Taiwan region have permitted the importation of pork containing ractopamine (a kind of leanness-enhancing agent) from the United States (US). Earlier on, the results of sampling tests, conducted by a media organisation on pork products taken from the local market which had been manufactured in the Taiwan region and the US, indicated that the ractopamine content of seven of such products had exceeded the prescribed limits. It is learnt that an excessive intake of ractopamine by the human body over a long period of time will increase the risk of developing cancers. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will comprehensively step up sampling tests, at the import, wholesale and retail levels, on the ractopamine content of pork and related products imported from the Taiwan region and the US, in order to safeguard public health; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that the raw materials of food products not imported from the aforesaid two places may include pork and related products that were manufactured in the two places and contain ractopamine, whether the Government will consider enacting legislation to require that the places of origin of the major raw materials be set out on the labels of all prepackaged foods; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as it has been reported that the quantities of pork and related products imported from the Taiwan region into Hong Kong as recently published by the Census and Statistics Department are less than the quantities of such products exported to Hong Kong in the same period as published by the authorities of the Taiwan region, whether it has studied (i) the reasons for that, and (ii) if smuggling was involved; if it has studied and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the details and whether it has followed up the matter; if it has not followed up, of 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 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 90 micrograms per kilogram respectively, while that in the fat of cattle and fat with skin of pigs is 10 micrograms per kilogram. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has 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. Since 2018, the CFS has collected about 800 samples of pork, beef and related products from various countries/regions for testing of beta-agonists. All samples were tested with satisfactory results. The CFS will continue to conduct relevant food surveillance on a risk-based approach. As regards the import statistics of relevant food maintained by the Census and Statistics Department, they are compiled based on information given in trade declarations which importers lodge with the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) as required under the relevant legislation. The CFS maintains close contact with the C&ED on intelligence exchange and joint efforts to combat illegal food import activities. So far, no smuggling of meat from Taiwan to Hong Kong has been found.

On the labelling of prepackaged food, relevant requirements are set out in the prevailing legislation in Hong Kong with reference to the international standard set by the Codex, covering information on the name of the food, its list of ingredients, manufacturer/packer, etc. The prevailing Codex standard does not require setting out on the label the place of origin of each ingredient or major raw material of the food. We will continue to closely monitor international developments on ensuring food safety and review the situation in Hong Kong in a timely manner.