LCQ3: Measures to cope with discharge of nuclear wastewater by Japanese Government

Following is a question by the Hon Joephy Chan and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (June 28):

Question:

It has been reported that the Embassy of Japan in China earlier held a briefing session in Beijing on the discharge of nuclear wastewater generated by the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station, but it did not invite the Chinese media to attend the session, and even disseminated false information at the session in an attempt to mislead the international community. Also, it did not follow the principle of goodwill consultation to explore other options to dispose of the nuclear wastewater. There are views that the Government should formulate the most stringent precautionary measures in response to the discharge plan. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has assessed the immediate impact and level of risks posed by the discharge plan to food safety and public health in Hong Kong, and of the measures in place to enhance the public's understanding of the plan and its risks to their own health;

(2) apart from aquatic products, whether the Government will impose import control on processed food (regardless of their places of origin) made from fresh food from Fukushima and its neighbouring areas, expand the scope of radiological testing on imported Japanese food products, and require all processed food imported from Japan to be accompanied by radiation certificates and pass the relevant tests; and

(3) whether the authorities will, in addition to drawing reference from the reports published by the International Atomic Energy Agency on the discharge plan, draw reference from other representative international research and assessment reports to help them formulate more comprehensive corresponding measures; if so, of the titles of such reports, as well as the details of the corresponding measures (including the additional manpower and total expenditure involved); if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government of Japan plans to discharge the wastewater generated in the process of cooling the reactors at the Fukushima nuclear power station (FNPS) into the ocean after treatment in the summer of 2023. The Hong Kong

Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has repeatedly expressed grave concern about the impact of the discharge plan on food safety, and has indicated clearly to the Japanese authorities that they should not discharge the wastewater from the FNPS into the ocean unilaterally without the consensus of the international community so as to avoid bringing about irreversible impacts on the environment.

Food safety is of an issue of paramount importance affecting public health. The Government is responsible for ensuring that food sold in Hong Kong is safe and fit for consumption. Since issues such as pollution to the ocean are international issues in the realm of foreign affairs, the Environment and Ecology Bureau (EEB) has, after the announcement of the discharge plan of Japan, relayed the opinions and concerns of various sectors to the Office of the Commissioner of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (OCMFA) in Hong Kong, and maintained liaison with the OCMFA. The EEB and relevant departments are fully prepared in response to the discharge plan, and our primary concern is to safeguard food safety and public health in Hong Kong.

A consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Joephy Chan is provided as follows:

(1) At present, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Task Force is still examining whether the discharge plan meets the safety standards of the IAEA, and whether it would have negative impact on human health and the ecosystem. The relevant concluding report has yet been published. According to the current information and assessment, food products that have higher risks of being affected by the discharge plan are mainly aquatic products from Fukushima and its nearby coastal prefectures. In response to the discharge plan of Japan, I have published an article in the newspaper and attended media interviews to explain the discharge plan and the relevant health risks to members of the public with the view to enhancing their understanding. Such efforts have already drawn the attention of the community. To provide more comprehensive information to the public, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) is releasing on its website relevant information and results of the radiological tests on imported Japanese food products, while the Department of Health is providing on its website information on the health effects of radiation and frequently asked questions with answers for public perusal. Once Japan commences the discharge, the CFS will step up the dissemination of information by releasing results of the radiological tests on its website on each working day and issue press release on a regular basis. We will also set up a one-stop webpage in the EEB website with the view to fostering better understanding of the public on the latest information on the safety of imported Japanese food.

(2) According to the current information and assessment, our preliminary plan is to put all fresh, chilled, frozen and dried aquatic products, seaweed and sea salt from the affected prefectures, under the scope of our tightened import control measures. As for other highly processed food containing aquatic products, generally speaking, the radionuclides on the surface of the ingredient will be removed during the preparation and the concentration of the concerned ingredient will also be diluted after addition of other

ingredients. According to the IAEA, general cooking and food processing procedures can lower the radioactivity of food effectively. Having said that, the HKSAR Government will enhance the testing arrangement, including test on relevant processed food of aquatic product, with the view to providing dual protection and ensuring food safety. As for Japanese food products which are still allowed to be imported, enhanced testing will still be applied even when such food products are accompanied by radiation certificates, so as to achieve dual insurance. Since mid-April, the CFS has gradually stepped up radiological tests on imported Japanese food products, especially those on aquatic products and specified radionuclides. Since mid-June, the CFS has also expanded the scope of testing to cover all Japanese aquatic products (irrespective of prefectures), and stepped up radiological tests on other processed food imported from Japan.

(3) If the Japanese authorities proceed with the discharge of wastewater as planned, it will last for 30 years. We are highly concerned about how they will ensure that the treatment facility maintains effective operation throughout, and that the discharge plan poses no potential risks to food safety and the marine ecosystem. Safeguarding food safety and public health in Hong Kong is the primary concern of the HKSAR Government. Once the discharge has commenced, the HKSAR Government will immediately take stringent import control measures, including prohibiting the import of aquatic products from the highest-risk coastal prefectures in proximity to Fukushima, and imposing stringent import control on aquatic products from other prefectures which are at risk by denying entry of these products into Hong Kong unless they are accompanied by radiation certificates. As for the details of the proposed measures, including the prefectures to be covered, apart from the conclusion of the final report of the IAEA, the opinions of the Mainland experts, the practices and assessments of the Mainland and neighbouring regions, relevant information provided by Japan on the issue and other relevant information available in the international community will be taken into full consideration before a decision is made.

Apart from stepping up import control measures, the Government has also enhanced testing arrangement to provide dual protection. The additional expenditure incurred by the Government for procuring necessary testing equipment over these two years is around $6 million per year, and the additional expenditure on manpower, equipment maintenance, testing consumables and related matters will be around $3.8 million per year.