

## LCQ9: Import and food surveillance of hairy crabs

Following is a question by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (November 14):

Question:

Some hairy crab sellers have relayed to me that while hairy crabs are in season each year after the Mid-Autumn Festival, this year up to early this month, no hairy crabs (save for a small batch of hairy crabs in August) were issued with approval documents by the Mainland authorities for export to Hong Kong. This has greatly affected the sellers' business. On the other hand, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) found, during sampling checks conducted on hairy crabs in 2016, that two of the samples contained an excessive level of dioxins, and hence prosecuted two hairy crab sellers by summons. The magistrate acquitted the sellers and cited an expert's advice that only if, within four months, an ordinary person consumed 47, or one with high health risk consumed 10, hairy crabs involved in the cases which had an excessive level of dioxins, would there be adverse effects on such person's health, not to mention that ordinary people would not consume the aforesaid quantities of hairy crabs with an excessive level of dioxins. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as I have learnt that the Mainland authorities have been issuing approval documents for export of hairy crabs to other places, whether it has gained an understanding from the Mainland authorities as to why they have not issued this year approval documents for export of hairy crabs to Hong Kong; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has maintained good communication and negotiated with the Mainland authorities with a view to resolving, as soon as possible, the issues concerning the supply of hairy crabs to Hong Kong; if so, of the details as well as the policy bureaux and government departments responsible for such work;

(3) given that the action level adopted by FEHD's Centre for Food Safety for dioxins and dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls in hairy crabs stands at 6.5 picograms toxic equivalent per gram of the sample, whether it knows how this action level compares with those relevant levels adopted by the Mainland and other jurisdictions (set out in a table); whether there are differences between the levels adopted by those jurisdictions for the hairy crabs cultured locally and for those imported; and

(4) given the aforesaid expert advice, whether the Centre for Food Safety has studied relaxing the aforesaid action level; if so, of the outcome; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) stipulates that all food for sale in Hong Kong must be fit for human consumption. Food safety is our prime concern in the surveillance and testing of imported food.

Regardless of their places of origin, hairy crabs can be imported into Hong Kong provided that they meet Hong Kong's food safety requirements and each consignment is accompanied with a health certificate issued by the relevant authorities of the exporting economies. The source of supply of hairy crabs to Hong Kong is essentially determined by the market.

In the hairy crab season of 2016, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department detected that the levels of dioxins and dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls (hereafter referred to as dioxins) of some hairy crab samples exceeded its action level. To maintain public confidence on the safety of hairy crabs available for sale in Hong Kong, CFS has implemented an arrangement since 2017 to hold up hairy crabs at import level and take samples for testing of dioxins. The importers concerned may make available the hairy crabs for sale in the market only after they are informed by CFS of satisfactory testing results. This hold-and-test arrangement is still in use by CFS.

For the hairy crab season this year, the import of hairy crabs so far is as follows:

- (a) in mid-August, a consignment of hairy crabs totalling about 100 kg imported from the Mainland and accompanied with a health certificate was released to the market after the test results on the samples were found satisfactory by CFS;
- (b) since September, 13 consignments of hairy crabs totalling about 3 100 kg imported from Japan and accompanied with health certificates were made available to the market for sale after the test results on the samples were found satisfactory by CFS; and
- (c) since the end of October, eight consignments of hairy crabs from the Mainland totalling about 7 000 kg, which were imported from Korea and accompanied with health certificates, were made available to the market for sale after the test results on the samples were found satisfactory by CFS.

Regarding the various parts of the question, our reply is as follows:

- (1) and (2) The Mainland authorities monitor the quality of hairy crabs for supply to Hong Kong at source. They have their established approval procedures regarding the issuance of authorisation documents for the export.

We understand that hairy crabs are seasonal fresh food. In this regard,

the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and CFS have been liaising closely with the relevant Mainland authorities on the import arrangements of hairy crabs from the Mainland into Hong Kong this year, with a view to striking a better balance between food safety protection and business facilitation. FHB and CFS have also been informing the trade from time to time of issues relating to the import and testing arrangements of hairy crabs this year. If there are any new arrangements, we will inform the trade immediately.

(3) Dioxins are highly toxic carcinogens. The Government has started testing the levels of dioxins in food since 1999 and in hairy crabs since 2014. Taking into account the regulatory arrangements of economies which had set standards on the levels of dioxins in crabs (the EU and Taiwan) and the local dietary habits on hairy crabs, CFS set an action level of 6.5 picograms (pg) toxic equivalent per gram of the food sample (wet weight) for dioxins in edible portion of hairy crabs in 2016. The standards of the EU and Taiwan are as below:

| Economies | Per gram of crab sample (wet weight) | Total maximum level of dioxins and dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls (pg toxic equivalent) |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The EU    | Muscle meat from appendages          | 6.5                                                                                            |
| Taiwan    | Whole edible portion                 |                                                                                                |

(4) Food is the main source of human intake of dioxins. Dioxins are fat-soluble, not easily broken down, accumulate in fatty tissues, and may accumulate in human bodies through the food chain.

CFS has assessed the health risks of consuming hairy crabs containing dioxins. The results showed that the health risks vary depending on the background exposures to dioxins of individuals and the levels of dioxins of hairy crabs consumed. In any case, the higher the levels of dioxins of hairy crabs, the less the amount that can be consumed safely. Individuals with high background exposures to dioxins are more likely to have higher health risks than those with average background exposures if the same amount of hairy crabs containing the same levels of dioxins are consumed.

CFS will continue to keep in view the latest development in the regulation of dioxins in food in other economies, the local dietary habits and other factors, and constantly review its regulatory arrangements for the levels of dioxins in hairy crabs, including the action level.