

Enhanced inspection ordered following food poisoning incidents

China's food watchdog has ordered stepped up inspection on food safety in the rural areas after eight people have died from tainted food over the past two months.

In one incident on Dec. 18, 2016, 30 residents came down with food poisoning, two of whom later died, after the cook mistook sodium nitrite for salt during a funeral dinner in Miaoya Village, Bazhong city of Sichuan Province, according to a circular released by the China Food and Drug Administration.

The other two cases included one in a village in Mudanjiang City in northeast China's Heilongjiang Province and one in Huilong Village in Hubei Province in November and December last year. In both instances, methanol was mistakenly served during the banquets, leading to three deaths in each case.

The administration ordered enhanced inspection of the liquor market and strict penalties for illegalities such as selling fake or adulterated liquor.

Regular inspections and supervision of rural catering services should be strengthened and standardized guidance should be released for food safety and banquets in rural areas to prevent such incidents from happening again.

China encourages college grads to work in grassroots

The central government has issued a guideline to encourage more college graduates to work at the community level.

The guideline, which was jointly issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, and the General Office of the State Council, has been designed to involve college graduates in economic and social development.

College graduates will be encouraged to find employment in the modern seed industry, agrotechny, countryside tourism, rural e-commerce, rural cooperatives and water conservation projects, according to the guideline.

The guideline says college graduates will be encouraged to work in the middle and western parts of the country, the northeast China and other less-developed and remote areas.

Graduates will also be encouraged to join the army with preferential policies.

The guideline says college graduates will be encouraged to work for small- and medium-sized enterprises, or start their own businesses.

To be attractive to graduates, companies must offer good training programs as well as higher wages and allowances, according to the guideline.

The guideline stipulates that civil servant recruitment in provincial-level agencies will only consider candidates with at least two years of grassroots working experience.

The government estimates that about 7.95 million college students will graduate this year, accounting for over a half of newly-added urban labor force.

[China plans huge spending on farmland improvement](#)

China plans huge spending to improve farmland quality in the next few years in hopes of propping up grain supplies as shrinking arable land has put the populous country under pressure to feed its people.

A total of 600 billion yuan (around 88 billion U.S. dollars) will be pumped into the field by 2020, Han Jun, deputy director of the central agricultural work leading team office, said on Tuesday at a press conference.

The central and local governments will provide the funds, Han said, adding that he hopes the efforts will also attract private investment.

It was the latest move in a nationwide official program to build "high-standard cropland," which, according to official documents, refers to large-scale, contiguous plots of land with fertile soil and modern farming facilities. This type of farmland can maintain stable and high yields and has sound ecological condition and strong capacity to resist natural disasters.

China improved around 26.87 million hectares of farmland to meet those standards from 2011 to 2015. The Ministry of Land and Resources estimates there will be a 10- to 20-percent rise in grain production capacity.

With the new investment plan, improvement of another 26.67 million hectares can be completed by 2020, Han said, adding the government will try to hit 40 million hectares.

China's arable land reserves have been falling in recent years, some occupied by construction of new homes and factories and some replanted with trees and

grass for ecological protection. The phenomenon, along with the first drop in grain output in more than a decade last year, has added to concerns about food security.

The country still had a shortfall of about 20 million tonnes in the amount of grain it produced and consumed, according to official calculations.

China is eyeing the farmland-improvement program to help boost grain yields and modernize agriculture.

Efforts must be made to stabilize farmland area and improve its quality to ensure grain self-sufficiency and food security, according to a document released Monday by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council.

The document demanded more efforts to replenish, as much arable land is currently occupied by non-agricultural construction.

China aims to retain at least 124.33 million hectares of arable land in 2020, and the figure was 133.3 million hectares at the end of 2015. The government has set a warning level of 120 million hectares and reiterated the level must not be breached.

The arable land should be protected "the way we protect pandas," according to the document.

[Central China province reports new H7N9 case](#)

Another human H7N9 avian flu case has been reported in central China's Hunan Province, bringing the total number of infections in the province to 16, including five fatalities, this year.

The female patient, 37, was diagnosed in Yueyang City Monday. She had contact with poultry before falling ill and is in critical condition, according to the Hunan provincial disease control and prevention center.

People who had close contact with the patient have not shown symptoms of fever or coughing.

In addition to Hunan, human H7N9 infections have also been reported in the provinces of Guangdong, Guizhou, Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi and Shandong, as well as in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Macao.

H7N9 is a bird flu strain first reported to have infected humans in March 2013 in China. It is most likely to strike in winter and spring.

Shanghai seeks ways to promote smoking ban

Political advisers in Shanghai have proposed the city learn from other cities about publicizing the smoking ban that will take effect in five weeks.

Beginning March 1, all public indoor venues and work areas, as well as some outdoor places, such as art performance and sporting venues, open areas at maternity and infant hospitals, kindergartens and bus stops in Shanghai will become nonsmoking zones to shield nonsmokers from secondhand smoke.

But the current anti-smoking advertisements in the city are far from enough, said some local political advisers during their annual gathering last week.

“In Singapore, smoking bans with pictures, such as broken cigarette butts and children covering their mouths and noses surrounded by smoke, are very commonly seen in the streets to gain people’s attention,” said Wang Xinmei, a member of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Shanghai’s political advisory body.

“Beijing also did a good job informing the public of its smoking ban, which became effective in June 2015. On all the flights and trains bound for Beijing there are repeat broadcasts of the smoking ban, which seems powerful, and Shanghai can learn from that,” said Wang, who is also chairwoman of the Jinshan district branch of the city’s political advisory body.

Gwan Tat-cheong, a Hongkonger and another political adviser in Shanghai, said Shanghai may look to Hong Kong, where smoking indoors has been prohibited since 2007. Publicity of the smoking ban is ubiquitous in public venues and on different communication channels throughout the city, and the notifications also highlight the cost that violators face.

“It always states clearly that errant smokers can be slapped with fines of HK\$1,500 (\$193),” said Gwan, who is also a senior adviser at the Bank of East Asia (China) Ltd.

Severe punishment for violators in the first few days after the regulation takes effect may also serve as a powerful deterrent, said the political advisers. Individuals caught smoking in forbidden areas will be fined from 50 to 200 yuan, and organizations that fail to stop smokers will be fined up to 30,000 yuan, according to the new regulation.

Wu Fan, director of the Shanghai Center for Disease Control, said: “Any new regulation, such as the citywide fireworks and firecrackers ban since the beginning of last year, faces challenges when it first comes into being, but it’ll become easier when a consensus is formed in the whole society.”

China is the world's largest consumer and producer of tobacco. World Health Organization statistics showed that there are more than 300 million smokers in the country, accounting for almost one-third of the world's total.