USDA Foreign Agricultural Service
GAIN Report
Global Agricultural Information Network

Voluntary _ Public

Date: 6/17/2011
GAIN Report Number: HK1125

Hong Kong

Post: Hong Kong

HKG's Efforts in Risk Analysis for Chemicals in Food Recognized

Report Categories:
Agriculture in the News
Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety
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Report Highlights:

Positive developments in Hong Kong's food safety system have been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) leading to its designation as a WHO Collaborating Center for Risk Analysis of Chemicals in Food from October 2010 until October 2014.

Summary

In a recently held regional symposium on food safety related incidents, a government official announced that Hong Kong has been designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a WHO Collaborating Center for Risk Analysis of Chemicals in Food between Oct 2010 and 2014. This acknowledges the effectiveness of Hong Kong's food safety system, including the Center of Food Safety (CFS) and a corresponding Expert Committee combined with sophisticated laboratory support. The CFS adopts a risk analysis approach, a strategy advocated by WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, to ensure food safety, including development of food standards and food safety regulatory measures.

Objectives

As a Collaborating Center for Risk Analysis of Chemicals in Food, the CFS will participate in the WHO Global Environment Monitoring System/Food Contamination Monitoring and Assessment Program through the provision of monitoring data on levels of priority contaminants in food and total diet. It will also provide information on the prevention, monitoring, control, exposure and assessment of health effects of contaminants in food. Moreover, Hong Kong is expected to assist in the surveillance of chemical contamination of food in the event of an emergency and provide training and advisory services with WHO and other countries to strengthen their food contamination monitoring and assessment capabilities.

In the context of chemical risks in food, the WHO's mission is to brief Codex and governments "on levels and trends of contaminants in food, their contribution to total human exposure, and significance with regard to public health and trade."

The following provides a glimpse of Hong Kong's work in these areas.

The Center for Food Safety

The CFS was established in 2006 with the mission to orchestrate all food related surveillance and regulation programs. An Expert Committee on Food Safety was established in the same year to help facilitate the CFS's interaction with local, China and overseas experts including academics, professionals, consumer groups and members of the trade, on the formulation of food safety measures and the review of food safety standards.

Food Surveillance

Hong Kong has a sophisticated risk-based food surveillance program. Each year the CFS conducts testing on about 65,000 samples to check for chemicals, including toxicity (71%), microbiological (24%) and radiological (3%) aspects, at a rate of 9 samples per 1000 population. Chemical testing includes food additives, contaminants and other harmful residues, and toxins. As China is the major supplier for produce, a government laboratory at the border provides expeditious and comprehensive testing services mainly for fresh produce imported from China. The testing services cover analysis of

pesticide residues in fresh vegetables and fruits; analysis of veterinary drug residues in raw milk, imported freshwater fish and chilled pork; and analysis of melamine in samples of raw and pasteurized milk imported from China.

In addition, about 50,000 urine samples and 7,200 tissue and blood samples are collected each year in animals for slaughter for testing of prohibited and restricted chemicals.

Management of Food Incident – Melamine

Hong Kong demonstrated its ability to take swift action in its response to melamine-tainted milk powder by being the first place in the world to set legal limits for the maximum concentration of melamine allowed in food. The Hong Kong government (HKG) set a maximum standard for melamine in food of 2.5 ppm and in infant products of 1 ppm on September 23, 2008 less than one month after the highly publicized detection of melamine in Chinese milk powder and infant formula. Between September 2008 and April 2009, melamine testing was conducted on 5,608 food samples. The CFS also collaborated with the Department of Health in assessing the risks to public health. This incident demonstrated Hong Kong's experience and capability in monitoring contaminants in food through vigorous food surveillance.

In a more recent example, the HKG set a maximum of concentration limit on DEHP (1.5 mg/kg), a potentially cancer-causing additive used in plastics, in food and medication as a result of the DEHP-tinted clouding agent used in drinks in Taiwan. Also, the CFS will include DEHP in Hong Kong's routine surveillance for prepackaged food that may be produced with the usage of clouding agents.

Risk Assessment Studies

The CFS conducts a number of risk assessment studies every year analyzing chemical and microbiological hazards that are of public health significance. To facilitate risk assessments, the CFS conducted a territory-wide population-based Food Consumption Survey in 2010 to collect information on food consumption patterns of the general public. Findings of the survey are used to facilitate Hong Kong's first Total Diet Study, which will then be able to provide data on public's exposure to hazards arising from contaminants and food additives from diet. With the availability of a Total Diet Study, the CFS will be able to conduct more comprehensive risk assessment of contaminants by not only reviewing the risk associated with the nature of the food but also the consumption of that particular food.