

**Voluntary Report** – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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**Report Name:** Food Incident Surveillance System Identifies 2000 Incidents in 2021

**Country:** Hong Kong

**Post:** Hong Kong

**Report Category:** Agriculture in the Economy, Agriculture in the News

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**Report Highlights:**

The Hong Kong government maintains a Food Incident Surveillance System (FISS) to monitor and proactively respond to foreign food incidents that could impact food products entering Hong Kong. In 2021, the CFS detected around 2,200 food incidents from the FISS. This surveillance led to the suspension of oysters harvested from Samish Bay, in Washington State from July to November 2021. In the event of food incidents, trading partners can mitigate the negative impact by providing a prompt response to the Hong Kong government addressing their concerns.

As Hong Kong is a free port and relies largely on food imports, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has established a Food Incident Surveillance System (FISS) to monitor and respond to food incidents outside Hong Kong. The rationale behind the system, is that with the globalization of food trade, food incidents that occur outside Hong Kong may have potential implications on local food safety.

To effectively monitoring overseas food incidents, the CFS participates in international food safety networks such as the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), which is managed jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, as well as receiving notifications from the European Union's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF). In addition, the CFS maintains close collaboration with other food safety authorities to facilitate rapid information exchange.

The Agricultural Trade Office (ATO) serves as the first point of contact of the CFS in all food-related issues including food incidents. Upon request for information, the ATO will alert FAS Washington for appropriate follow up action. U.S. agencies involved in dealing with domestic food incidents, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), are very transparent in updating food incident development and food recalls on their website which allows trading partners to have updated information quickly.

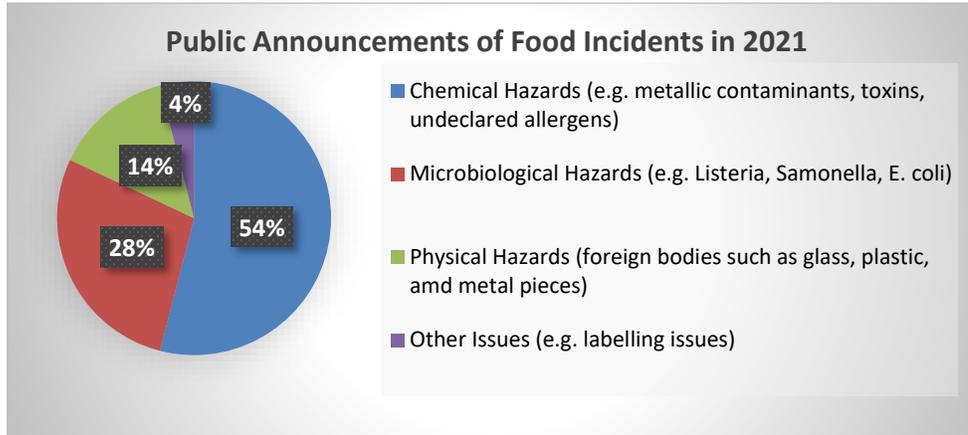
### **Hong Kong's Handling of Overseas Food Incidents**

The CFS informs the public about their established procedure of handling food incidents. The CFS first examines the potential impact of these incidents on the local community and assesses the associated risk. Next, it determines whether the affected food products are available in the market by reviewing import records, liaising with relevant authorities overseas and contacting local traders. When the implicated products are found available on the local market, the CFS would direct the trade to remove products from local shelves and recall affected products as appropriate. In addition, the CFS will alert consumers and traders of food incidents via various platforms as appropriate, including press release and social media.

### **Food Incidents in 2021**

In 2021, CFS detected around 2,200 food incidents from the FISS, including approximately 380 food incidents with undeclared allergens. The CFS issued 196 food incident posts, 21 press releases, 23 trade alerts and 17 food alerts/ allergy alerts, involving chemical hazards (e.g. metallic contaminants, toxins, undeclared allergens), microbiological hazards (e.g. Listeria, Salmonella, E. coli), physical hazards (e.g. foreign bodies) and other issues (e.g. incorrect date labelling). Over half of the incidents were related to chemical hazards (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**



Source: Hong Kong Center for Food Safety

### **A Food Incident Relating to U.S. Oysters**

In July 2021, the CFS identified a recall notice issued by the Washington State Department of Health on ready-to-eat raw oysters harvested in Samish Bay, which were suspected to be contaminated with *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*. The CFS contacted the ATO requesting more information. The ATO worked with Washington State authorities to coordinate a response. On July 23, 2021, the CFS issued a press release announcing the trade suspension of ready-to-eat oysters harvested from Samish Bay. In addition, an importer was identified to have imported some of the affected products which were circulating in the local retail market. As a precautionary measure, the CFS instructed the trade to suspend the importation and sale of all ready to eat raw oysters harvested in Samish Bay within Hong Kong, and instructed the importer to stop selling the affected products.

While a ban was imposed, the ATO was able to mitigate the impact by coordinating timely response to the CFS' request for information, thus limiting the ban to only oysters harvested from Samish Bay. Moreover, Washington State authorities had already voluntarily prohibited harvest from affected waters.

When the harvest seasons in Samish Bay resumed, the ATO coordinated with the Washington State Department of Health and the CFS to work out details as to how to lift the ban which was in place since July 2021. Upon receiving a report on the incident citing all required details, the CFS agreed to lift the ban in November 2021.

In 2021, U.S. exports of oysters to Hong Kong dropped 2 percent from the previous year to \$3.7 million. Washington was the leading supplying state, accounting for 96 percent of total U.S. oyster exports to Hong Kong.

### **Conclusion**

The CFS is very diligent in monitoring worldwide food incidents. There is a high tendency to impose a ban in response if the incident has any implications on local public health. However, it seems that the Hong Kong government exercises every effort to limit bans only to the affected area and their determination of "affected area" is reasonable and not over proportionate so as to limit the impact on international trade. Trading partners, on the other hand, are able to mitigate the adverse impact by promptly responding to information requests to allow the CFS to better assess the situation. If a ban is imposed, it is crucial to provide, as soon as possible, a report which includes investigation results and remedial actions in order to have the ban lifted.

**Attachments:**

No Attachments.