

LC: CS presents Government Minute in response to Report of Public Accounts Committee No. 71A and No. 72

Following is the speech (translated from Chinese) by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, in presenting the Government Minute in response to the Report of the Public Accounts Committee No. 71A and No. 72 in the Legislative Council today (December 11):

President,

I lay on the table today the Government Minute (GM) responding to Report No. 71A and 72 of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

I welcome the PAC Reports No. 71A and 72 presented to the Legislative Council on May 8 and October 16, 2019 respectively. I am grateful for the time and efforts devoted by the Chairman, Mr Abraham Shek and Members of PAC. The Government accepts PAC's various recommendations and sets out in detail the specific responses of the relevant bureaux/departments in the GM. PAC has conducted public hearings regarding "Centre for Food Safety: Import Control of Foods" in Report No. 71A and "Employment services provided by the Labour Department" in Report No. 72. I would like to highlight the key measures taken and progress made by the two departments (namely, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Labour Department (LD)) in response to the recommendations.

Import Control of Foods by CFS

The Government attaches great importance to safeguarding food safety. CFS will continue to discharge its responsibilities in import control of foods to ensure the safety of imported foods. To this end, CFS will adhere to its established mechanisms and procedures in implementing a pre-entry licensing system, verifying health documents, and conducting food inspections and surveillance at various food import control points of air, land and sea routes.

With respect to the control of foods imported by air, CFS definitely does not accept importers pre-selecting food samples for inspections. According to its operational manual in use, CFS staff must personally inspect each consignment of the targeted food by taking samples at random and examine the import documents. Having regard to Audit Commission's (Audit) observations, CFS has enhanced the guidance and training for and supervision of its frontline staff, including setting out the number of samples to be collected and formulating the guidelines on random sampling for physical inspections at the Airport Food Inspection Office, and implementing improvement measures to step up supervisory inspections of its staff.

For the control of foods imported by road, CFS has put in place a series of improvement measures, including extending the joint operations with the Customs and Excise Department. Apart from targeting vegetable vehicles, vehicles carrying regulated foods (e.g. eggs, meat, etc.) are also covered. Measures also include issuing a checklist on the required import documents for different types of food and the items to be inspected for the frontline staff at the Man Kam To Food Control Office, and requiring the frontline staff to check whether the vehicles and containers transporting chilled meat and poultry are on the approved list of CFS and to ensure that only those on the list are released.

Regarding the control of foods imported by sea, CFS is actively considering the feasibility of setting up a formal food control office with chilling facilities at the Kwai Chung Customhouse checkpoint with a view to enhancing inspections of targeted food consignments. It has updated the operational manual to clarify the requirement for CFS staff to witness the act of breaking container seals, and enhanced its computer system to ensure that the same food consignment will not be issued with multiple import licences. CFS has also stepped up its supervision to ensure that officers will take appropriate follow-up actions in accordance with the operational manual against importers which are late in submitting original health certificates for food consignments imported by sea.

CFS has implemented various improvement measures concerning the control of live food animals and live aquatic products, including checking whether the consignee's name on the animal health certificate matches with the importer's name on the permit issued by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department during import inspections, and verifying whether the quantities of livestock admitted to slaughterhouses match the quantities shown on the movement permits issued by officers at boundary control point to drivers. Furthermore, CFS has reviewed and will introduce within this year a simplified Food Import Declaration Form for completion by drivers in order to collect the necessary information more effectively for food traceability.

Regarding the registration of food importers or distributors, CFS has taken measures to further remind its staff at the boundary control points to check the importer's registration status immediately upon the arrival of a food consignment, and to take appropriate enforcement actions against unregistered food importers. CFS has also enhanced the supervision of food trader inspections to ensure that officers of the Food Importer/Distributor Registration and Import Licensing Office keep a proper record of the findings of inspections and follow-up actions, which include putting food traders involved in unsuccessful inspection cases on a monitoring list based on the circumstances of individual cases. Further, CFS has improved its monitoring system to remind its staff to arrange inspections of food traders on the list.

Meanwhile, CFS is developing and setting up five major information technology (IT) systems with a view to supporting the work of its frontline staff and reinforcing its capability in control and surveillance of imported foods, management of food safety incidents, risk assessment and food

traceability. These IT systems are expected to be rolled out in an order of priorities starting from late 2019 and be completed by 2024.

Employment services provided by LD

With respect to employment services provided by LD, LD has been actively following up on the recommendations made by the Audit's and PAC on its provision of employment services, and has introduced various improvement measures with a view to providing more effective and convenient employment and recruitment services for job seekers and employers.

LD strives to enhance the employment opportunities of job seekers with special needs (including young and elderly job seekers and job seekers with disabilities) and step up its efforts in assisting them to stay longer in their jobs upon placement. LD will launch a pilot scheme to encourage young people, elderly aged 60 or above, and persons with disabilities engaged respectively under the Youth Employment and Training Programme, the Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged, and the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme to undergo and complete on-the-job training through the provision of a retention allowance, thereby stabilising employment. Apart from that, the department will launch a pilot programme in conjunction with non-government organisations to provide employment services to ethnic minority job seekers through a case management approach.

Taking into account the local economic situation and employment situation of the labour market, LD will continue to review the operation of its services from time to time. Corresponding adjustments or enhancements will be initiated in a timely manner so as to better meet the changing needs of both the job seekers and the employers.

President, I would like to thank the Chairman and Members of PAC again for their efforts and guidance. The concerned bureaux and departments will strictly adhere to its responses in the GM to make improvement in its daily operations and ensure the proper use of public funds.

Thank you, President.