LCQ7: Plan of Japanese Government to discharge nuclear wastewater into sea

Following is a question by the Dr Hon David Lam and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Miss Diane Wong, in the Legislative Council today (May 24):

Question:

It has been reported that the Japanese Government plans to, from the spring or summer of 2023, discharge into the sea more than one million tonnes of nuclear wastewater generated by the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station where a nuclear incident had occurred. In reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council on May 5, 2021, the Government indicated that it had requested the Japanese authorities to provide data on various aspects as well as information on control and surveillance in relation to the discharge of nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station, and that they must provide all relevant information, as well as formulate and promulgate a highly transparent and robust surveillance programme. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has continuously requested the Japanese authorities to provide up-to-date information, including the timetable for the discharge of nuclear wastewater; if so, of the details;

(2) as it has been reported that in 2022, Hong Kong remained the second largest export destination for Japanese agricultural, forestry and aquatic products, whether the Government actively explored replacement food sources over the past two years, so as to cope with the possible shortage of imported Japanese food and changes in the structure of the food industry resulting from the aforesaid discharge of nuclear wastewater; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether the Government has continuously conducted radioactivity screening on aquatic products from East Asian waters; if so, of the results?

Reply:

President,

We have reported to the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene of the Legislative Council on March 14 this year the stance of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government and our strategy and preparation in relation to food safety, in response to the Japanese Government's plan to discharge the wastewater generated in the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station (FNPS).

My reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(1) In April 2021, the Government of Japan announced the plan to discharge the wastewater generated in the process of cooling the reactors at the FNPS into the ocean after treatment in about two years' time (i.e., 2023). The plan has aroused concern from the international community and the public. Many stakeholders are concerned whether the discharge of wastewater into the ocean would have a serious impact on the marine ecosystem, the food chain and food safety.

The HKSAR Government has repeatedly expressed grave concern about the impact of the discharge plan on food safety, and has indicated clearly to the Japanese authorities that they should not discharge the wastewater from the FNPS into the ocean unilaterally without the consensus of the international community so as to avoid bringing about irreversible impacts on the environment. Since matters such as ocean pollution are international issues in the realm of foreign affairs, we have relayed the concerns of various sectors of the community to the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the HKSAR.

In response to Japan's plan to discharge wastewater into the ocean, the Environment and Ecology Bureau has set up an inter-departmental task force with the relevant government departments including the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, the Hong Kong Observatory, the Department of Health and the Government Laboratory to assess the impact of the discharge plan on food safety and to formulate response measures.

Meanwhile, the HKSAR Government has been following up with the Japanese authorities on the latest position of the discharge plan, and has requested them to provide more specific data and relevant information on matters relating to food safety and public health, including their monitoring programme on the surrounding environment and food surveillance programme. At present, the Task Force set up by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is conducting a review on whether the discharge plan meets the safety standard of the IAEA, and whether it would have negative impact on human health and the ecosystem. Members of the Task Force include experts from Mainland China, Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam. The Task Force has yet to publish its concluding report. We will continue to follow up on the assessment conducted by the Task Force on the one hand, and maintain communication with the Japanese authorities on the other to keep track of the development of the wastewater discharge plan. As stated by the Japanese authorities, the discharge plan has been scheduled to commence in the summer of 2023 but no concrete date has been announced.

(2) According to existing information, aquatic products from Fukushima and the nearby prefectures are at higher risk of being affected by the discharge plan. We will enhance the testing on imported Japanese food. We expect that import control on aquatic products from related prefectures may have to be tightened for a period of time after Japan's commencement of the discharge to ensure food safety and public confidence.

Relevant control measures include suspending the import of aquatic products from some prefectures shipped after the commencement of the discharge; or requiring such aquatic products be accompanied by radiation certificates and exporter certificates certifying that their radiation levels do not exceed the guideline levels set by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) and they are fit and safe for human consumption, or else such food products cannot be imported into Hong Kong. The details of relevant measures, including the prefectures to be covered, will depend on the conclusion of the final report of the IAEA, related information provided by the Japanese authorities, and risk assessments, etc.

In 2022, the major food imports from Japan amounted to about 2 per cent of the total food supply (in terms of weight) in Hong Kong, among which aquatic products accounted for about 6.75 per cent of Hong Kong's total supply. Relevant government departments will maintain close liaison with related local trades (including importers of Japanese food products and catering operators) to enable their better grasp of the latest position of the discharge plan and the possible import control measures which the Government may implement to safeguard food safety, so that early preparation can be made.

(3) Currently, the import of vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from Fukushima is still prohibited in Hong Kong. Radiation certificates have to be produced for the import of game, meat, poultry, poultry eggs and aquatic products from Fukushima and its four neighbouring prefectures (i.e., Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Gunma), whereas both radiation certificates and exporter certificates are required for the import of vegetables, fruits, milk, milk beverages and dried milk from the four prefectures. From March 2011 to April 2023, the CFS tested more than 770 000 samples of imported Japanese food products, including about 120 000 samples of aquatic products, seaweeds and sea salt, and found that the radiation levels of all samples did not exceed the guideline levels of the Codex. The CFS will continue to adopt a risk-based principle in conducting radiation tests on Japanese food products under its routine Food Surveillance Programme (FSP) and timely adjust the corresponding radiation monitoring work having regard to the risk assessment results to ensure food safety and safeguard public health.

Furthermore, the CFS also conducts radiation testing on food products imported from places other than Japan (including countries or regions in East Asian waters) under its routine FSP with all samples passed with satisfactory results. The CFS will flexibly adjust the arrangements of taking food samples for testing in light of actual circumstances and will adopt a risk-based principle to enhance surveillance of specific food types.