Food Safety: Hong Kong’s Experience

- Overview of Hong Kong’s food safety regulatory system
- Our cooperation with Mainland China
- Challenges of regulators and businesses
Background

• “One Country, Two Systems”

• Full autonomy in administering food safety; e.g. treatment of U.S. beef products

• Imports 90% of food, 60% from Mainland China (fresh produce, live food animals)
HK’s Food Safety System: 4 Pillars

• Legislation and enforcement
• Risk management and surveillance
• Risk communication
• International cooperation
Legislation and Enforcement

• Rule-based, specified limits on harmful substances
• Registration of all food importers and suppliers, and record keeping
• Powers to impose ban or mandatory recall
• All food establishments to be licensed
• Labelling of ingredients/nutrition information
• Centre for Food Safety: multi-discipline team
Risk Management and Surveillance

- Regular, targeted, thematic, and seasonal surveillance
- 65,000 samples tested every year/9 samples per 1,000 population. Over 99% satisfactory
- Results released monthly with details and posted on-line (immediate alert if serious)
- Contingency plans, exercises and drills (e.g. nuclear incidents, avian flu, etc.)
Risk Communication

- Experts, food trade, and general public
- Over 85% households have broadband access, mobile penetration 240%
- Web site, Facebook, Apps, eNews, email/SMS notifications – about 43,000 active accounts
- Trade consultation forums and consumer liaison groups
- Strategy: open and transparent
International Cooperation

- Alerts from overseas jurisdictions of food incidents in exporting countries
- Monitor international food safety events and assess potential impact on HK
- World Health Organization, Codex, World Organization for Animal Health
- Expert Committee with HK, Mainland and overseas experts
Cooperation with Mainland China

- Registered farms and plants to qualify for export to Hong Kong, health certificates, documentary trail
- Visit to farms and plants by HK inspectors
- Agreed communication channels and protocols for handling incidents (e.g. unsatisfactory samples)
- Not just “One Country, Two Systems”, but also “One Country, Two Pigs”
Challenges: Build Legal Framework

• Don’t make perfect the enemy of good

• Go for something that can be implemented and complied with

• Prepare to make trade-offs: stable supply, compliance cost, private sector capability, grace periods, phased implementation
Challenges: Build Trust

• Credibility is everything, but ... people inherently do not trust regulators

• The more you test, the more problems you find

• People believe in bad news rather than good news

• “You must be hiding something from us”
Challenges: Build Trust

• “When did you first know about it? Why has it taken so long to tell us?”

• “You should have found it first”

• “You should have found it earlier”

• “Powell Doctrine”: deploy overwhelming strike capability during a major food safety crisis

• Examples: Fukushima, low iodine infant formula
Challenges: Build Capacity

- Food safety is a very intensive government operation
- Build capacity in the field but also tackle other systemic weakness: business ethics, rule of law, transparency, accountability, coordination within government, etc.
- Long process: took Hong Kong more than 30 years to get to where we are
Role of Businesses

- Responsibilities and opportunities
- Private sector can help upgrade skills, self-regulate and provide reality check
- Rising middle class and growing market for quality, branded food products
- Chinese enterprises to “Go Global” for know-how and technology
- Food industry a major victim of food incidents and a key partner to clean up the act
Prospects of Reform

• The building blocks are there – need to scale up

• Challenges: 1.3 billion people, vast country, small producers and suppliers, economy in transition, systemic issues

• Start with large cities first?

• “One Country, One Pig”?