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Date: 5/8/2014

GAIN Report Number: HK1419

Hong Kong

Post: Hong Kong

Microbiological Guidelines for Food

Report Categories:

Agriculture in the News

Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

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Report Highlights:

The Hong Kong government has notified the WTO via G/SPS/N/HKG/39 that they are amending the Microbiological Guidelines for Food which is tentatively scheduled to take effect on June 26, 2014.

Comments from interested parties should be submitted before June 15. Significant changes to the revised guidelines include modifying existing and establishing additional microbiological criteria. Incorporating the relevant standards of Codex, the revised guidelines also establish microbiological guidelines for specific food items such as powdered formula for infants and young children, spices and live/raw bivalve molluscs intended for direct consumption. The microbiological guidelines for raw bivalve molluscs should be most relevant to U.S. exporters because of the significant amount of Hong Kong imports. The food safety authority is monitoring closely the hygienic conditions of live bivalve molluscs which are to be consumed raw because of their high risk nature.

Summary

Hong Kong Microbiological Guidelines were first established in 2002 and subsequently revised in 2007 and 2009 respectively. The Microbiological Guidelines serve as a reference for the food safety authority to monitor safety and hygienic quality of food. They cover microbiological guidelines for ready-to-eat food and specific items including bottled waters, edible ice, and non-bottled drinks.

With a view to keep up international development, the Hong Kong Food Safety Center set up a working group in 2011 to amend the existing Microbiological Guidelines. The working group is composed of academics, professionals and government officials.

The Hong Kong government has recently issued a WTO notification informing members that their revised Microbiological Guidelines tentatively will take effect on June 20, 2014 and that comments should be submitted before June 15.

The revised Microbiological Guidelines are composed of three sections, namely, I) Aerobic colony count (ACC) and Hygiene indicator organisms for ready-to-eat food; II) specific foodborne pathogens for ready-to-eat food; and III) microbiological criteria for specific food items. Given below are the key changes between the proposed revision of the Microbiological Guidelines 2014 and the existing ones.

- 1) Adding one indicator organism – Enterobacteriaceae is added as another indicator organism when *E. coli* count is the only indicator organism included in the existing guidelines. The criterion listed for Enterobacteriaceae applies to heat treated food, fishes, and cheeses (excluding cheeses ripened using a culture of *Hafnia alvei* or *Proteus vulgaris*). It does not apply to fresh fruit and vegetables or food that contains fresh fruit and vegetables as ingredients e.g. sandwiches with salad, because these food types can contain high levels of Enterobacteriaceae as part of their normal micro-flora.
- 2) Adding one bacterial pathogen – *Shigella* spp. The microbiological criterion for *Shigella* spp. is considered as satisfactory if not detected in 25 g.

The existing guidelines include nine specific bacterial pathogens, namely, *Campylobacter* spp., *E. coli* 0157, *Salmonella* spp., *V. cholerae*, *L. monocytogenes*, *V. parahaemolyticus*, *S. aureus*, *C. perfringens*, and *B. cereus*.

- 3) Lowering the microbiological limit for the following pathogens for the classification of satisfactory.
 - A) *L. monocytogenes* for ready-to-eat food (excluding refrigerated food and food for infants) from less than 20 cfu to less than 10 cfu per gram
 - B) *C. perfringens* from less than 20 cfu to less than 10 cfu per gram

- 4) The revised guidelines will include microbiological criteria for six specific items, namely, bottled waters, edible ice, non-bottled drinks, powdered formula for infants and young children, ready-to-eat spices and raw bivalve molluscs intended for direct consumption.
- 5) Reclassification of microbiological quality to three categories: satisfactory, borderline and unsatisfactory. In cases when food samples are found with specific foodborne pathogens at levels considered as “unsatisfactory”, the Center for Food will instruct parties concerned, e.g. vendors, to stop sale of food items and will investigate causes and find out remedial actions. In addition, enforcement actions may be taken.

The Hong Kong Center for Food Safety provides the full proposed guidelines on its [website](#) and invites comments, if any, to be submitted to its office before June 15.

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