

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

THIS REPORT CONTAINS ASSESSMENTS OF COMMODITY AND TRADE ISSUES MADE BY
USDA STAFF AND NOT NECESSARILY STATEMENTS OF OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT
POLICY

Voluntary Public

Date: 8/13/2012

GAIN Report Number: HK1221

Hong Kong

Post: Hong Kong

Worries over Pellet Spill Polluting Fish Caught

Report Categories:

Agriculture in the News

Fishery Products

Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

Approved By:

Erich Kuss

Prepared By:

Caroline Yuen

Report Highlights:

Local fishing industry and some consumers are worried that pellet spill in sea resulted from fallen containers from a ship during a typhoon two weeks ago might pollute fish caught locally. Some fishermen are complaining that fish are showing a poor appetite. While the polypropylene pellets in question are non-toxic, environmentalists fear they will absorb toxins which will then pass into the food chain. The Hong Kong government is gearing up full momentum to do the clean-up work and assess the impact on food safety and marine ecology.

Background

The Marine Department first received reports of two containers floating in Hong Kong water on July 24, a day after a strong typhoon had swiped across Hong Kong. Further investigation found that a ship dropped seven containers amid strong winds during the typhoon. Six of them contained plastic pellets and the other one clean glass bottles. The incident surfaced to public attention when a green group on August 3 appealed on internet for volunteers to clean up pellets washed onto the beach.

In response, the Hong Kong government then announced their coordination efforts among various departments in clean-up operation on water and beaches. Risk assessment will also be conducted on the impact on marine ecology and food chain. The food authority pledged to do testing on fish and post results on the government [webpage](#).

The six containers contained a total of 150 MT of plastic pellets. Some of the containers were broken causing plastic pellets scattered at sea and washed on nearby beaches. As of Aug 12, five containers had already been located with over 76 MT of pellets salvaged. About 50 MT were collected in waters and the rest onshore. There are still two missing containers and over 70 MT of pellets not yet salvaged.

The plastic pellets are polypropylene, which are used to make different things including food containers. Government officials quoted analysis by government marine and food safety experts saying that polypropylene plastic pellets were chemically inert and were not toxic. "There is no cause for undue concern over food safety Although environmental contaminants such as organic pollutants can be absorbed by scattered plastic pellets over time, the increased food safety risk is unlikely to be significant as wild fish locally caught only constitutes a very small part of our diet."

Impact on Local Fishing Industry

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, which is responsible for regulating fishing industry, has been closely monitoring the situation and assured the public that no abnormal activity or death of fish has been reported. However, in thirty seven fish samples the department collected as of August 12 from three affected marine fish culture zones, pellets ranging from 0.4 gram to 1 gram were found in the stomachs of seven fish samples. The government said the food safety risk was believed to be low.

On the food side, the Center for Food Safety (CFS) pledged to step up monitoring of food safety for fish caught in local waters, as well as marine cultured fish in Hong Kong. The results

of tests will be posted online. As of August 12, the CFS tested 250 fish samples and no pellets were detected.

While the government tried to ease public concern by saying that the general health risk to the public was low in terms of food safety, the public including fish farm owners, green groups and shoppers expressed concern.

Some fishermen are complaining that fish are showing a poor appetite. One affected fish farm owner indicated that fish in his farm recently reduced feed consumption by two-thirds. His wholesaler also stopped buying fish from him.

Reportedly, some shoppers have shown reservation for consuming local marine fish. The industry is expecting business to drop 10 to 30 percent. Fish prices have dropped by 10 percent.

In the aspect of marine ecology, environmentalists concerned that pellets will absorb insecticides and other chemicals in the sea. They will become toxic and consequence will become serious and accumulative when marine animals eat up these pellets.

Hong Kong Fisheries

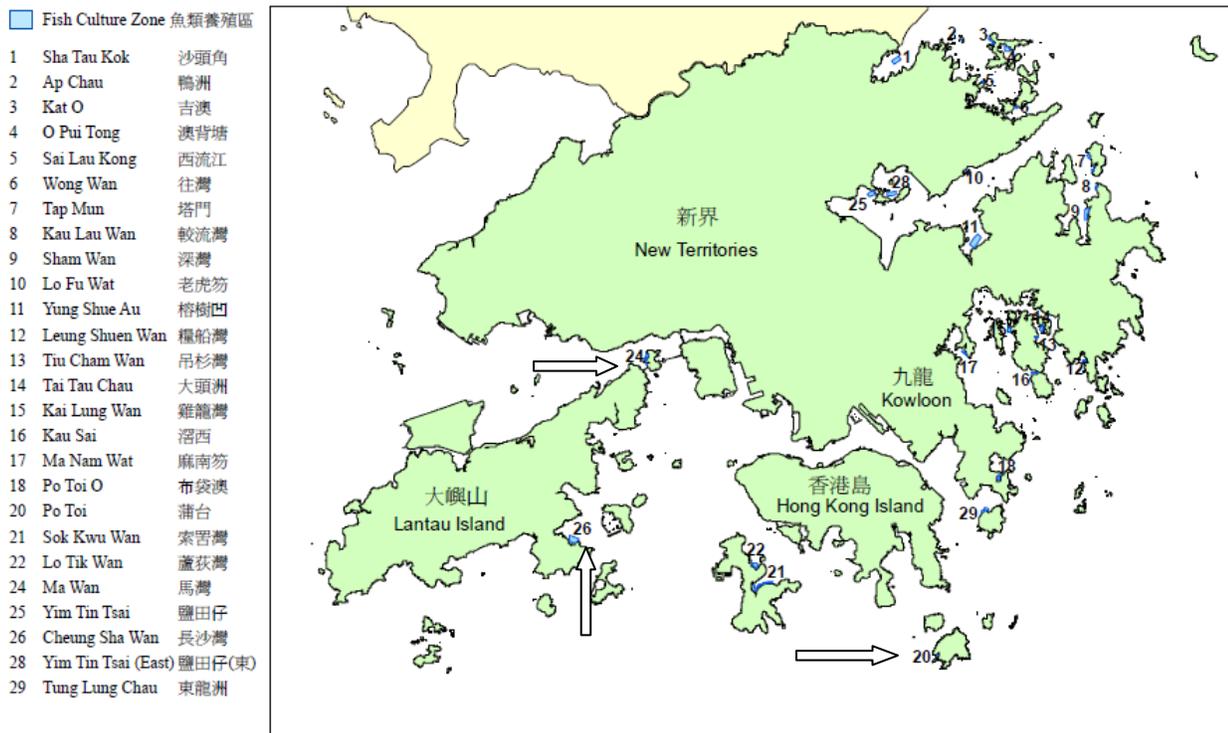
Fisheries in Hong Kong include both capture and aquaculture fisheries. In 2011, capture fisheries amounted to an estimated 170,720 MT of fish produce valued at US\$303 million. The industry consists of some 4,000 vessels with over 90 percent of the fish catch originated from the South China Sea.

Aquaculture in Hong Kong includes marine fish, pond fish and oyster culture. In 2011 aquaculture produce reached 3,560 MT valued at US\$20 million. It accounted for merely 2 percent in weight and 6 percent in value of the total fisheries production.

There are currently 26 fish culture zones occupying a total sea area of 209 ha with some 1,012 licensed operators. Licensed raft area totaled 29 ha. Most farms are small and family-based. They have one or two rafts with average size of 280 square meters. The estimated production in 2011 was about 1,185 MT valued at US\$12 million.

Marine fish culture seems to be mostly affected by the pellets spill. Three of the culture zones are detected with pellets. They are identified as zone 20, 24 and 26 in the map below. A total of 17 MT of pellets have been collected with the majority (11 MT) were salvaged from zone 26.

Figure: Fish Culture Zones in Hong Kong



Source: Hong Kong Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

Table : Hong Kong Fish Production

| | MT | HK\$ | US\$ | share by weight | share by value |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------|------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Aquaculture | 3,560 | 155 | 20 | 2% | 6% |
| Marine fish | 1,185 | 94 | 12 | 1% | 4% |
| Pond fish | 2,315 | 57 | 7 | 1% | 2% |
| Oyster | 60 | 4 | 1 | 0% | 0% |
| Capture fish | 170,720 | 2,358 | 303 | 98% | 94% |
| Total | 174,280 | 2,513 | 323 | 100% | 100% |

Source : Hong Kong Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

Liability

The manufacturer and shipping company of the containers have been identified. No party has claimed ownership of the collected pellets. Meanwhile, the manufacturer has set aside US\$1.29 million (HK\$10 million) to pay for the clean-up of plastic pellets.

Liability for the incident is yet to be determined by the government investigation. The

government has yet to confirm whether the ship was in Hong Kong waters when the containers fell into the sea.

Fishermen are requesting the government to compensate for their financial loss. The government has agreed to consider the possibility to provide them with some form of compensation or subsidy. Negotiation is still in process.

The government is planning to send plastic pellets to a recycler instead of dumping them in landfills despite recycling might not be economical due to the mixing of pellets with sand or rubbish. The decision is based on environmental considerations.

An environmental group estimated that it would take US\$26 million to clear up all the pellets.