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Epidemio-surveillance of food-borne diseases and food safety rapid alert systems
(Prepared by Thailand)

Since the Ministry of Public Health has realized that the epidemio-surveillance of food-borne diseases and food safety rapid alert system is an essential element for consumers' health protection, epidemio-surveillance system has been established and has had an important role in the public health system in Thailand since 1969. In addition, after the Communicable Diseases Act B.E. 2523 (1980) was issued and enforced, the communicable diseases surveillance system has been implemented in the country and the complete epidemio-surveillance of food-borne diseases in Thailand and systemic networking has finally been established. The network includes all relevant parties from such a small community level as subdistrict level to the national level. Epidemiological data from the disease surveillance and case monitoring system will be collected and reported to District Public Health Offices and Provincial Public Health Offices by every public health service unit, which includes health station, community hospital, general hospital, provincial hospital, and regional hospital. The collected data will be finally sent from the Provincial Public Health Offices to Bureau of Epidemiology of the Department of Communicable Disease Control in the central region, which is the key organization responsible for analysis of reported data, providing epidemiological reports, and performing disease prevention and controlling activities together with other related agencies. In any emergency cases related to food-borne diseases, the Department of Communicable Disease Control works cooperatively with the Thai Food and Drug Administration to investigate the sources, confirm the causative agents, and control the diseases. Additionally, for zoonoses (e.g. bird flu), all relevant agencies in the Ministry of Public Health are responsible for coordinating and cooperating with Department of Livestock Development of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to control the disease at the farm level, to prevent the infection in humans, and to treat infectious patients.

It has been realized that the emergency food safety warning system or 'Rapid Alert System for Food Safety' is very important for strengthening the consumers' health protection system, a close and strong cooperation among all responsible agencies, including a strict implementation of laws and regulations are needed. In Thailand, the following monitoring activities are performed regarding to food safety related emergency cases:

1. Gathering of information related to unsafe food
 - (a) Information from importing countries
Importing countries will give an emergency warning and re-export or return the food back to Thailand if it is found that an exported food item from Thailand is unsafe.
 - (b) Information from food surveillance system
Thailand has a food surveillance system focusing on the contamination of prohibited substances in food. An emergency warning will be reported to the responsible organizations if it is found that food available in the Thai market is contaminated with these prohibited substances.

2. Implementation of law and regulatory measures

Risk analysis on a hazardous substance or unsafe situation related to food will be conducted by the cooperation between related authorities in order to find the most appropriate risk management option for that hazard handling. Consequently, a Notification of the Ministry of Public Health will be issued and enforced in order to control or to minimize the risk. For example, a Notification for prohibition on importation or production or distribution of a particular food could be issued.

3. Action processes

- (a) Thai FDA is responsible for coordination with related organizations in investigation and monitoring of domestic food products and their manufacturing processes, detention of unsafe imported food products, or recall of unsafe food products from the market.
- (b) In case of being warned and informed by importing countries about the cause of rejection or return of exported food items, following processes will be implemented by Thai FDA:
 - Coordination with responsible staff and Thai FDA officers to either take legal action or do the food monitoring, sampling and testing.
 - Sending a notification and information to the food producers and/or food exporters regarding the food rejection from importing countries. The food manufacturing processes will be investigated in order to find and solve the problem. If that returned food item has been also distributed in Thailand, the food must be recalled from the Thai market.

In conclusion, an efficient monitoring and surveillance system is an essential basis for the development and strengthening of food safety control system. To strengthen the monitoring and surveillance system of the country, followings are needed:

- 1. Efficient cooperative working and strengthened capacity building among related parties.
- 2. Development of performance capacity of related personnel, especially inspectors, for an efficient monitoring and surveillance system.
- 3. Supports from FAO/WHO, especially to developing countries, on the following aspects:
 - 3.1 Development of capacity building and strengthening of food safety monitoring and surveillance system to a higher standard level in order to reduce trading arguments under the WTO Agreement.
 - 3.2 Development of laboratory capability to be able to analyze new contaminants.