

# Stiffer penalties for food hygiene lapses

## Foodcourt operators face temporary closure if there are too many breaches

■ BY AMRESH GUNASINGHAM

OWNERS of dirty food stalls face higher fines for serious lapses in hygiene, under a revised penalty system which comes into effect next month.

By the end of the year, operators of 2,500 licensed foodcourts, coffee shops, and canteens will also come under the new penalty system and face having their premises closed temporarily if there are too many hygiene breaches.

The moves are part of the Government's attempt to prevent a repeat of the

outbreak of food poisoning at the Geylang Serai temporary market last year.

The National Environment Agency (NEA), which regulates hygiene standards in food establishments, will raise the minimum fine for errant stall owners from \$100 to between \$200 and \$400, depending on the seriousness of the offence.

Failing to use plastic bags to dispose of refuse is a minor offence. But preparing food on the floor or failing to prevent rodent infestation are serious offences.

Private operators of foodcourts, coffee shops and canteens will also be made

liable for hygiene lapses in common areas of their establishments, such as toilets.

If operators chalk up 24 demerit points within a year, they will have to shut their premises for up to three days for cleaning.

The stricter measures were announced in Parliament yesterday by Environment and Water Resources Minister Yaacob Ibrahim when responding to Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Holland-Bukit Timah GRC).

Mr Liang asked if the system used by the NEA to enforce hygiene standards in food outlets could be strengthened in the light of the Geylang Serai incident last April, when two people died and 152 others fell ill after eating from a stall there.

Dr Yaacob said outbreaks of food poisoning here were rare – an average of four cases recorded per 1,000 food

### ■ NEW SYSTEM

From next month, a new penalty system will come into effect for individual food stall owners.

Severity of offence	Demerit point	Composition fine	
		Before April 1	After April 1
Minor offence	2 points	\$100	\$200
Major offence	4 points	\$100	\$300
Serious offence	6 points	\$100	\$400

Note: The system will be extended to operators of coffee shops, foodcourts and canteens by the end of the year.

Source: NEA

outlets for each of the last four years. This is comparable to countries such as Japan and Britain.

Under current guidelines, stall owners are responsible for maintaining hygiene standards within their premises, while operators are in charge of areas such as toilets and refuse collection points.

Food operators contacted accepted the new penalty system, saying that it is a way to raise hygiene standards.

Mr Marc Leoi, chief development officer of Koufu, which operates 59 food centres, said: "It is sad that it has come to this. But whether there are new regulations or not, basic standards must be there."

He added that the new system also depends on the public helping to maintain cleanliness levels when patronising food centres.

In Parliament, Mr Liang also asked Dr Yaacob about recalcitrant operators hauled up for hygiene-related offences.

Dr Yaacob said NEA enforcement officers issued 2,650 tickets for food hygiene-related offences last year.

This was a 14 per cent drop from the year before, but higher than the 2,212 tickets in 2007.

To enforce the new measures, the NEA will beef up the number of enforcement officers patrolling establishments, from the current 63 to 104.

"The additional manpower will enable us to carry out more frequent inspections, which... will help ensure good hygiene standards are observed at food stalls and food shops," he said.

The NEA will also tighten its internal system for grading stalls for food hygiene, to ensure this can be done more quickly.

One issue that the Geylang Serai incident raised was that some stall holders there had to wait months to be issued with decals indicating hygiene grades.

Dr Yaacob said the NEA took a serious view of the administrative lapses and had reprimanded the officers concerned.

amreshg@sph.com.sg