CEO responds to public comments

MR Andrew Tan, the National Environment Agency's (NEA) chief executive officer, also sent a reply to The Straits Times yesterday about the food poisoning incident at the Geylang Serai Temporary Market, which read:

"I thank all letter-writers and journalists of The Straits Times who have commented on the importance of maintaining high standards of public hygiene in our hawker centres, following the severe incident of food poisoning traced to a stall at the Geylang Serai Temporary Market.

We, at NEA, are deeply saddened by this episode that is linked to more than 150 people falling ill, many acutely, with two losing their lives. Our hearts are with the affected people and the grieving families to whom we have extended our deepest condolences.

The outpouring of concern rightfully shows the widespread sympathy we share for them as well as the high standards expected of our markets and food centres.

Maintaining good hygiene standards

NEA has the overall responsibility for ensuring high standards of public health and hygiene in Singapore. We would like to assure the public that NEA will strive to uphold these high standards.

The current system for upholding public hygiene comprising legislation, surveillance, enforcement and public education has served us well.

The number of food poisoning cases in Singapore is very low. Over the last three years, there has been an average of only four food poisoning incidents a year even though we have 5,600 hawker stalls across 106 hawker centres.

Grading of stalls

The grading scheme, introduced in 1997, was intended to motivate licensees to improve on their personal and food hygiene and upkeep of their premises. All stalls that are graded and allowed to operate meet the basic hygiene requirements.

The grading scheme sought to differentiate and recognise those who made greater efforts to improve and sustain the cleanliness and hygiene of their operations. By making the grades public, it was hoped that consumers' choice could also lend pressure to encourage hawkers to strive for higher standards.

NEA, on its part, also actively worked with stallholders to encourage them to improve, by paying more attention to those with lower grades. NEA facilitates upgrading courses so that food handlers gain the knowledge to raise standards.

Food stalls in hawker centres that are graded "A" and "B" are inspected every eight weeks, while stalls graded "C" and "D" are inspected more frequently every six weeks. NEA uses a point demerit system to penalise food handlers for any lapses in maintaining good personal and food hygiene.

When a food handler accumulates 12 demerit points in a year, his licence will be suspended for two weeks. This is how NEA keeps unhygienic stalls from operating.

This regime has led to a significant improvement in food hygiene levels in Singapore. Over the years, the proportion of grade "A" and "B" stalls has increased from 46 per cent in 2002 to 86 per cent last year.

The remaining 14 per cent of stalls are graded "C" and they meet hygiene requirements. The grading and point demerit system, together with a regime of regular inspections, have helped to keep food poisoning incidence low.

Notwithstanding, food poisoning incidents can occur in any food establishment, regardless of its grading, if there are lapses in personal hygiene.

Overall hygiene standards at hawker centres have also improved through the Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme.

Since 2001, a total of 72 centres have been upgraded with better facilities and toilets, among other improvements.

The remaining 30 or so centres will be upgraded by 2012.

Cleanliness of Geylang Serai Temporary Market

When markets and hawker centres are being upgraded, grassroot organisations and their advisers can choose to have a temporary market which is not provided for under the Government's Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme.

If so, they also carry the responsibility of keeping the temporary market clean to meet NEA standards. However, NEA will intervene if it assesses the need to do so in the interest of public health.

In the case of Geylang Serai Market, the Kampong Ubi CCC decided to build and manage the temporary market. Despite the best of efforts put in by the Temporary Market Management Committee in implementing its cleaning regime and in tackling the rat infestation problem, the problem had persisted.

NEA should have moved in firmly earlier to address this problem. Sustained efforts with NEA's assistance and enforcement have now led to a marked improvement.

NEA will continue to require the Management Committee to sustain ongoing cleaning and pest control efforts.

Greater vigilance

Going forward, NEA will step up its vigilance and enforce higher standards of public hygiene on all food outlets. NEA will also conduct more refresher training on food and personal hygiene for stallholders and food handlers.

We will further tighten up our own procedures to ensure the timely issuing and display of up-to-date grading labels.

To impress on the need for good hygiene practices by all and enhance understanding of the overall system, NEA will step up engagement of market managements and operators of food establishments.

Public awareness efforts so as to also involve consumers in maintaining high levels of public hygiene at all times are also being looked into.

NEA will further improve on the current system, taking into account the useful feedback and suggestions thus far. We thank everyone for the valuable feedback and suggestions. We continue to welcome views at contact_NEA@nea.gov.sg and 1800-CALL-NEA (1800-2255-632)."