

Chapter XI : Environment and Food

11.1 At the Chairman's invitation, the Acting Secretary for the Environment and Food (SEF), Mr Paul TANG, gave a presentation highlighting the major tasks of the Environment and Food Bureau (Appendix V-10).

Waste management

11.2 Noting that the reduction in manufacturing activities within Hong Kong had resulted in a decrease in the amount of waste delivered to the Chemical Waste Treatment Centre (CWTC), Miss CHOY So-yuk enquired if the Administration would adjust the funding for CWTC to take account of the lowered utilization rate. The Director of Environmental Protection (DEP) said that the amount of waste treated by CWTC was stabilized at about 63 000 tons per year. This was less than the design capacity of 100 000 tons per year which was set at a time when there was more chemical waste produced in Hong Kong. The funding for the operation of CWTC comprised two components, viz the fixed overhead cost of \$180 million per year and the variable operating cost calculated on the basis of the actual throughput of waste for treatment. The variable operating cost for the last year was \$270 million. He added that the Administration was conscious of the excess capacity and was looking at the possibility of making use of it. Meanwhile, negotiation with the contractor was underway with a view to reaching a new contractual agreement by the end of this year. At Miss CHOY's request, DEP undertook to provide information on the expiry date of the current contract.

11.3 Miss CHAN Yuen-han sought elaboration on how recyclable wastes collected from waste separation bins were disposed of. The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) said that it was the Administration's intention to promote waste separation and recycling. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) would ensure that the recyclables collected were delivered to the recyclers. There were at present four companies in Hong Kong dealing with recycling of plastic waste. However, as plastic waste was usually bulky and it occupied a lot of space in transport and storage, the high overhead costs for recycling of plastic waste had posed difficulties to the recyclers. Given the low profit margin of the recycling trade, efforts had been made to facilitate the collection of recyclable waste for recyclers and exporters of waste. In response to Miss CHAN's question on whether there was a need to provide assistance to recyclers of plastic waste, DEP said that it remained an issue of economics as to whether government should provide assistance to ensure the viability of a business operation. Notwithstanding, the Administration had

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provided incentives ranging from providing land for recycling activities at discounted rates to facilitating actual separation of waste. A total of 9 000 sets of separation bins had been provided in over 700 public housing estates. The Administration aimed at expanding the service to more than 1 000 public housing estates in the coming year. In addition, there had been another 1 000 sets of separation bins being provided in public places and the number of collection points had also increased. To help reduce the overheads of the recycling industry, consideration was given to centralizing waste collection. The recyclable waste, including plastics, would be collected and delivered to recyclers or exporters of waste.

11.4 Miss Emily LAU stressed the need for waste reduction and recycling. She said that it might be necessary for the Administration to reconsider the introduction of landfill charges which was common in overseas countries. The introduction of landfill charges should not be seen as a measure to raise revenue but a disincentive to the generation of waste. While agreeing to Miss LAU's views, DEP said that not everyone would be prepared to accept the introduction of landfill charges. When the landfill charging scheme was first introduced a few years ago, it was met with considerable opposition from the trade. Since then, the Administration had been trying to reach an agreement with the affected parties on the manner in which charges should be collected. After series of consultation sessions, the Administration had just been able to finalize its proposals which would be put forward to members soon. The Deputy Secretary for the Environment and Food (B) (DS(EF)B) added that the Administration was trying to develop a charging scheme which was targeted at those who generated the waste rather than those handling it.

11.5 Miss Emily LAU expressed concern about the slow progress of implementing a landfill charging scheme in Hong Kong and questioned in what manner Hong Kong was different from other places as to be so difficult in implementing such a scheme. DS(EF)B said that he was not aware of any major cities in the world that did not have a charging scheme. Nevertheless, despite the absence of a charging scheme, the waste separation and recovery rates in Hong Kong were comparable to that of other major cities in the world. He added that Administration would need to address the concerns of the transport trade and to provide facilities for waste segregation and recycling before introducing the charging scheme.

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11.6 Referring to an allegation that the Administration was planning to impose charges on the disposal of construction and demolition (C&D) waste at a rate of \$125 per ton, Mr LAU Ping-cheung enquired if part of the charges collected could be used to subsidize recycling activities. DS(EF)B clarified that the Administration had no intention to impose charges on the handling of inert C&D materials which could be used for reclamation and recycling. Given that C&D materials were often mixed with waste, funding would be required for acquiring separation facilities for C&D materials. As regards the use and recycling of waste components from C&D materials, DS(EF)B advised that there was no market for these waste materials according to a study in this regard. The focus was now on the reduction of volume of waste through improvements in building practices. As regards the incentives to encourage the reduction of C&D waste, DS(EF)B said that as there was no charge for the separation and disposal of C&D waste, there would be no rebate for the reduction of waste. However, the Administration would seek to encourage the building industry to adopt more environmental friendly practices through provisions in the terms of contracts. The Construction Industry Review Committee had also put forward a number of proposals on how to improve building practices.

11.7 In response to Mr LEUNG Fu-wah, the Director of Marine (D of M) explained that the \$43.3 million allocated to the Marine Department for collecting and scavenging marine refuse would cover operating costs of its current fleet as well as costs for hiring vessels for the purpose. Of the 66 vessels in use for collecting marine refuse, 13 were Government-owned and the remaining 53 were owned by the eight contractors of the Marine Department. Mr LEUNG noted the Government's intention to downsize its fleet and expressed concern about the redundancy problem. In response, D of M advised that the Marine Department would implement a natural wastage programme over a period of ten years. Apart from removing six smaller refuse collection vessels which were approaching the end of their life expectancy, the Department would also contract out some of its services in the next year or two. He nevertheless pointed out that while more vessels would be removed from the fleet over the next few years, not all of the vessels to be removed were involved in the collection of marine refuse.

Air quality control

11.8 Referring to the Administration's proposal of providing financial assistance for retrofitting 50 000 pre-Euro heavy diesel vehicles with suitable catalytic converters, Mrs Miriam LAU questioned the cost effectiveness of the

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programme given the high investment cost of \$500 million to \$1,000 million. She pointed out that while the catalytic converters were useful in eliminating carbon monoxide, they had little effect on other exhaust emissions such as respirable suspended particulates and nitrogen oxides. She remarked that it might be more worthwhile to consider other alternatives such as the use of low sulphur diesel and the provision of incentives, including the exemption of first registration tax, to encourage the switch to more environmental friendly Euro III vehicles. In response, DEP said that the Administration was still evaluating the effectiveness of the catalytic converters. It would also look at measures to reduce the emissions from older Euro models which were expected to be phased out in time. However, as heavy diesel vehicles were usually more costly and had a longer life span, owners of these vehicles would unlikely opt to replace them with newer Euro III models unless these vehicles were approaching the end of their economic life. Measures would have to be mapped out to reduce the exhaust emissions from these vehicles and to encourage the phasing out of older models.

11.9 Sharing Mrs LAU's concern, Mr LAW Chi-kwong said that as an incentive to phase out older models of heavy diesel vehicles, consideration should be given to adjusting the accounting principles in respect of depreciation of vehicles so as to shorten their economic life, making it more cost effective to replace old models with new ones. He said that Members of the Democratic Party were in support of encouraging the switch to newer models through the introduction of a charging scheme for licence fees based on the level of exhaust emissions. The Deputy Secretary for the Environment and Food (C) said that the Administration was focusing on the retrofitting of pre-Euro heavy diesel vehicles with catalytic converters and on the trial use of electric and liquefied petroleum gas light buses. The introduction of tax incentives for the switch to cleaner vehicles that conformed to certain emission standards was being examined. The Administration would report to the Panel once a proposal was drawn up but could not commit to a timetable for formulation of the proposal.

11.10 Referring to the findings of an indoor air quality survey of 70 government buildings, Professor NG Ching-fai enquired about the number of buildings which failed to meet level 2 of the draft Indoor Air Quality Objectives and the measures to improve the air quality of these buildings. The Director of Electrical and Mechanical Services said that according to very preliminary results, about 60% of the buildings surveyed met level 2 of the draft Objectives. Further measurements had to be taken. Although there were some marginal cases, most

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of the remaining buildings had only failed to meet some of the Objectives. Improvement measures would be carried out in some of these buildings. The survey had also taken into account the ambient air quality of the surrounding area.

Water quality improvement

11.11 In reply to Ms Audrey EU's question on whether the Administration had set any objectives for water quality, DEP said that the quality of inland waters had improved significantly over the past years as a result of the reduction in the amount of pollution discharged. Marine life had returned to many of the streams. The remaining problems related to the continuous discharge of sewage from unsewered villages and the pollution from livestock farms. Considerable resources had been spent in providing sewerage facilities to the villages. About \$9 billion would be spent in improving sewerage over the next five years.

11.12 Responding to Mr Albert CHAN's concern about the illegal disposal of livestock waste, DEP agreed that the problem was serious but pointed out that there were enforcement difficulties in the control of livestock waste. While most of the operators of livestock farms were law abiding and had in place waste treatment facilities for their livestock or made use of the free waste collection service, there were unscrupulous operators who tried to get round the law by discharging livestock waste in the middle of the night to nearby streams through concealed discharge points. Despite the deployment of a significant number of staff of the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) in ambush control, enforcement actions had been difficult. As such, EDP had been advising against building residential developments in close proximity to large-scale livestock farms due to the odour nuisance. Mr CHAN was disappointed that the Administration had not been able to resolve the problem and considered that more vigorous actions should be carried out to overcome the enforcement difficulties. Expressing similar concern, Dr TANG Siu-tong remarked that the odour from livestock farms was a serious nuisance to residents nearby.

Greening policy

11.13 Mr WONG Yung-kan was disappointed with Government's lack of commitment in carrying out greening works and pointed out that greening efforts should not be confined to developments at Lantau. SEF advised that the Administration was pressing ahead with greening efforts, and that the landscaping of slopes and the planting of trees along the North Lantau Highway were but a

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few of the examples of the efforts taken. The Government was reviewing its current greening policy with a view to improving departmental co-ordination, bringing about further visible improvements especially in urban built-up areas, and promoting the concept of greening in the community which had been applied in many of the works projects and would continue to be applied in future projects. Efforts would also be made to sustain the greening policy through improved maintenance service.

Country parks

11.14 Noting that concrete had been used in the maintenance and repair of paths and slopes of country parks, Dr LO Wing-lok asked if there were other alternatives to upkeep the country parks since hikers would find it uncomfortable to walk on concrete paths. Apart from the provision of various facilities such as shelters and notice boards, Dr LO suggested that efforts should be made to enhance reception of mobile phones in country parks to facilitate emergency rescue operations. He also saw the need to deploy more patrol staff in the parks so that in times of inclement weather, users of the parks could be given the necessary warning. The Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (DFAC) explained that some of the slopes were stabilized with the use of concrete before they were declared as country parks. The Administration was aware that the use of concrete was inappropriate from environmental point of view and had therefore taken steps to pave new slopes with soil and grass wherever possible. As for the paths, DFAC said that some of these were being constructed as part of the Rural Improvement Works Programme under the Home Affairs Department. Concrete was often used as this was preferred by the villagers. For paths constructed by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), mixtures of soil and rocks instead of concrete would be used as far as possible. Regarding the reception of mobile telephones, DAFC said that through the co-ordinated efforts of telephone companies, the coverage had been expanded to most of the country parks. However, there were still some areas in the Sai Kung Country Park which required further improvement. There were also other areas which, due to height and geographic conditions, would have difficulties in the reception of mobile phones. He added that the patrol staff in country parks would warn hikers of inclement weather.

Labelling of genetically modified food

11.15 Noting that about 100 analytical examinations of genetically modified (GM) food per month would be conducted in 2001-02, Mr IP Kwok-him enquired about the criteria to be adopted in deciding the number of examinations and the types of food to be tested as well as the testing methodology. DFEH said that the Government Chemist would be conducting about 1 200 analytical examinations of GM food per year as a start. The number of food tests to be undertaken each year was expected to increase annually, taking into account the latest development in GM food. In the recently published consultation document on labelling of GM food, a total of three options for introducing a labelling system were identified. These included a voluntary system, a mandatory system and a voluntary system initially to be followed by a mandatory system at a later date. Irrespective of the option taken, the Administration had to make preparatory arrangements to provide for the facilities and the technology required in the analytical examination of GM food. The results of the food tests would be made available for public reference.

11.16 As the Administration was in the process of consulting the public on whether the threshold for GM labelling of food should be pitched at 1% or 5% of the food content, Miss Cyd HO enquired about the prevailing threshold limit adopted by the Government Chemist in deciding the types of food products to be tested and whether such a threshold limit would have impact on the costs for conducting food tests. DFEH said that the policy on labelling of GM food had yet to be formulated given that the consultation was still underway. At present, there was no international consensus on labelling of GM food or food testing protocol. The Administration would draw reference from the experience of different countries in food testing and labelling requirements. She added that staff of the Government Laboratory had visited food laboratories in the United Kingdom last year to study the testing methodology for GM food. The Government Chemist would be provided with the necessary manpower and resources to perform laboratory tests for the detection of GM content and the percentage amount. To this end, a Real Time Polymerase Chain Reaction System had been procured. Both the testing equipments and methodology to be adopted were recognized to be of international standard. To allow for flexibility, non-civil service contract staff would also be employed to assist in the analytical examination of GM food.

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Cleansing services

11.17 While acknowledging that the percentage of public toilets serviced by toilet attendants during daytime would be increased from 45% to 60% in 2001-02, Mr TAM Yiu-chung enquired if such a service could be extended to all public toilets. He said that this would not only improve the cleanliness of toilets but also create new job opportunities. DFEH replied that there were resource implications if attendants were to be provided in all public toilets. She added that in 2001-02, toilets with a daily throughput of 300 persons would be provided with toilet attendants. Moreover, publicity for promoting toilet cleanliness would be stepped up through the “Clean Hong Kong Campaign”. It was hoped that with improved toilet habits, the work of toilet attendants could be made easier. Mr TAM was concerned about the cleanliness of unattended toilets with low usage rate. He remained of the view that the provision of attendants in all public toilets was worth pursuing, particularly when this would create employment opportunities. While agreeing to consider Mr TAM’s suggestion, DFEH said that there were competing priorities in the allocation of resources to cleansing services.

11.18 Referring that the \$82 million worth of public toilet cleansing services were outsourced to nine contractors, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan was concerned if FEHD had in place effective measures to guard against exploitation of workers by the contractors as he did not wish to see workers being offered unreasonably low wages. DFEH said that in awarding the cleansing contracts, the Department would assess whether the contractors had the necessary experience, expertise and resources to cope with the work specified in the contract. Enforcement actions would be taken against unscrupulous employers for breaching the Employment Ordinance. Although the Government policy was not to set any minimum wage, the Administration was considering ways to build into the contracts provisions requiring the successful tenderers to provide reasonable wages and working hours to their workers. Responding further to Mr LEE, DFEH agreed to provide detailed breakdown on the number of workers involved and the staff costs for each of the nine public toilet cleansing contracts.

11.19 Mr Henry WU queried why FEHD had only procured six units of on-board weighing devices for refuse collection vehicles. DFEH explained that there was a need to install on-board weighing devices for refuse collection vehicles so that drivers would be able to know the weight of refuse since overloading was an offence in law. At present, some of the refuse collection

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vehicles had already been retrofitted with on-board weighing devices. For those refuse collection vehicles which would be approaching the end of their usable life, the Department considered it not cost effective to install weighing devices and preferred to defer the installation of these devices until the vehicles were replaced. As regards Mr WU's further enquiry on the rationale for phasing the procurement of 400 units of on-board monitoring devices for special purpose vehicles into two stages, DFEH said this was to take account of the allocation of resources and the time for tendering the procurement.

Prevention of livestock diseases

11.20 Dr TANG Siu-tong enquired whether the monitoring and prevention of livestock diseases were undertaken by existing staff or new staff recruited for such purposes. DAFC said that there was no provision for staff increase in this respect in 2001-02, the monitoring and prevention of livestock diseases were carried out by existing staff. As regards statistics on the causes of death for livestock, DAFC advised that while AFCD did not have complete statistics in this regard, it did maintain statistics on major infectious livestock diseases such as the foot and mouth disease. It was noted that livestock kept in farms usually had a fatality rate of about 15%. In Hong Kong's circumstances, vaccination was the most effective method in preventing foot-and-mouth disease. Prior to the onset of the peak period for this disease, AFCD would issue notices to livestock farmers advising them of the vaccination programmes for their livestock. It would make regular inspections to livestock farms. The farmers could also consult the veterinary officers of AFCD regarding the health problems of their livestock.

11.21 Mr Martin LEE enquired about the precautionary measures adopted by the Administration in preventing the spread of foot and mouth disease which was prevalence in Europe and South America. SEF said that actions would be taken to ban the import of livestock from countries known to have the disease. DAFC advised that Hong Kong had its record of foot and mouth disease since 1950s. The disease was common and highly infectious among livestock. It was rare among human beings and those who came in frequent contact with infected livestock would be the most likely ones to contract the disease. The disease in human beings was mild and the affected would only suffer from minor skin irritations. Fatality rate for suckling pigs could be high, but about 80% to 90% of the mature pigs which were infected would recover from the disease. Generally, there were two different approaches to prevent the spread of the disease. One was the eradication of the disease through the slaughtering of infected

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livestock and the other was by way of vaccination. The former was usually adopted in countries where the disease was first found while the latter in places where the disease was common such as Hong Kong. Since vaccination was both economical and effective, it would be in their own interest for pig farmers in Hong Kong to vaccinate their pigs to avoid possible economic loss as pigs would stop growing once infected.

Control of hawking activities

11.22 Mr Fred LI expressed concern about the hawker blackspots in Sheung Wan and Tung Chung and asked how these together with other 80 blackspots could be dealt with. DFEH said that it was the Administration's intention to eliminate hawker blackspots as soon as it was practicable to do so. Staff of FEHD would endeavour to eliminate these hawker blackspots. At Mr LI's request, DFEH undertook to provide information on the number of hawker blackspots which had remained in existence all along.