

Chapter XI : Environment and Food

11.1 At the Chairman's invitation, the Secretary for the Environment and Food (SEF), Mrs Lily YAM, gave a presentation on the resource requirements under her policy areas in 2000-01 (Appendix V-10).

Air pollution

Replacement of diesel taxis by LPG taxis

11.2 On the Administration's plan to require all new taxis to use liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) starting from January 2001 and the entire taxi fleet to use LPG by 2006, Mrs Miriam LAU expressed concern about the adequacy of supporting facilities, such as LPG filling stations, and whether the taxi industry had the financial means for the conversion.

11.3 On supporting facilities, the Deputy Secretary for the Environment and Food (B) (DSEF(B)) advised that there would be a total of 14* filling stations by the end of 2000 to support 6 000 LPG taxis. Moreover, suitable sites were being identified for setting up workshops to provide maintenance services for LPG taxis. As regards the resources required for the conversion, the Administration had already set aside \$1.4 billion as grants to help owners of taxis, light buses and other pre-Euro standard diesel vehicles to switch over to LPG. The Administration was reviewing the proposed grant scheme in the light of the views expressed by the taxi industry, and planned to brief the LegCo Panel on Environmental Affairs and Panel on Transport on further details of the conversion programme in April 2000.

11.4 Mrs Miriam LAU estimated that out of the \$1.4 billion, only about \$0.7 billion was earmarked for taxi owners. In other words, taxi owners would be granted about \$40,000 per taxi. Mrs LAU was concerned that even with the grant, taxi owners would still have difficulty in meeting the conversion cost which was estimated to be \$200,000 per taxi. DSEF(B) advised that the Administration planned to complete the conversion programme by 2006, allowing sufficient time for taxi owners to arrange for the conversion. He also pointed out that the operating costs of LPG taxis should be much lower than those of diesel taxis over

* Note: The Environment and Food Bureau advised after the meeting that the figure should be "12".

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time. This factor might facilitate taxi owners to liaise with banks for loans.

11.5 Miss Emily LAU was disappointed to note the Administration's estimate that when all taxis used LPG in 2006, only a 25% reduction in particulates emitted from the entire vehicle fleet would be achieved. She asked for more effective measures to address the problem of air pollution in Hong Kong. In response, SEF pointed out that the Chief Executive had announced a series of new measures in his Policy Address in October 1999. The measures included, inter alia, the formulation of a new comprehensive transport strategy to encourage the use of less polluting modes of transport, for example, by improving railway services and pedestrian facilities, and the designation of certain streets with heavy pedestrian flow as pedestrian zones to reduce pollution caused by vehicle emissions. In response to Ms LAU's enquiry, SEF pointed out that it was difficult to indicate when the problem of air pollution would be fully addressed, having regard to the fact that it was a regional problem with various causes. However, she undertook to assess the effectiveness of the various measures for members' reference.

Hybrid vehicles and electric vehicles

11.6 Referring to the use of hybrid vehicles in the United States and Australia as well as the use of electric vehicles in Europe to abate air pollution, Mr Edward HO enquired if the Administration would also consider promoting the use of such vehicles in Hong Kong. He considered that the Administration had not been proactive enough in exploring ways to tackle the problem of air pollution in Hong Kong.

11.7 The Director of Environmental Protection (DEP) explained that hybrid vehicles were designed to address the problem of emissions from private cars, which was not the source of the problem of air pollution in Hong Kong. While some electric vehicles were being used in Hong Kong, a lot of development was required before they could be put into general use. In this connection, the Administration would be testing the use of electric light buses in the 6-month trial of LPG and electric light buses. DEP also advised that both hybrid vehicles and electric vehicles were very expensive. Mr HO considered that the cost aspect should not be the major consideration, as the Financial Secretary had in his Budget Speech proposed to extend the exemption for electric vehicles from first

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registration tax for another three years. SEF appreciated Mr HO's concern but pointed out that as a matter of priority, the Administration would first focus on the replacement of diesel vehicles wherever practicable as they were the main source of the problem of air pollution.

Cross-boundary air pollution

11.8 As regards the cross-boundary air pollution in the Pearl River Delta Region, SEF advised that a Joint Working Group on Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection had been set up under the Hong Kong Guangdong Co-operation Joint Conference to conduct a joint study on air quality in the Pearl River Delta Region and to formulate remedial and long-term preventive measures. The Working Group would also look into the feasibility of harmonizing motor diesel fuel specification between the two places. DEP added that the study was expected to be completed in early 2001.

Pollution from pig farms

11.9 As regards Dr TANG Siu-tong's concern about the pollution problem generated from pig farms in the New Territories, DEP advised that the number of such pollution cases had been increasing as more and more residential properties had been erected in the vicinity of the pig farms thus resulting in interface problem. While it was unlikely that the problem could be resolved once and for all, EPD would take enforcement action as and when appropriate. Moreover, 24-hour hotlines were available in the local control offices of EPD to facilitate the public to lodge their complaints.

Promotion of environmental protection

11.10 On the promotion of public awareness of environmental protection, Mr Martin LEE considered it more effective to adopt a bottom-up approach, i.e. to first promote the awareness of children and youth who might then educate their own parents. He enquired if the Administration would consider designating a school holiday for students to participate in environmental protection activities. The Chairman pointed out that in some overseas countries, students participated in such activities without the designation of a holiday and they were offered small

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souvenirs for what they had done. SEF assured members that EFB was committed to promoting awareness of environmental protection among all levels of the community, with a long-term target of making environmental protection a part of the everyday life of each individual. While she did not share the need for designating a school holiday for the purpose, she would further examine the feasibility of Mr LEE's proposal. SEF also pointed out that EPD had been working closely with the Education Department for students to participate in environmental protection activities, such as beach cleansing and tree planting. EPD had also launched the first Hong Kong Green School Award aiming at promoting green management in schools.

Hawker control

11.11 Members queried whether it was justified to allocate \$770 million for the control of unlicensed hawkers. The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) explained that the \$1.1 billion earmarked for hawker control included the provision of about \$770 million for the control of some 4 000 unlicensed hawkers and about \$330 million for the control of some 9 500 licensed hawkers. The provisions would be used for the payment of staff salaries (excluding fringe benefits), maintenance of vehicles and other administrative costs involved in hawker control. DFEH also pointed out that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) had 194 Hawker Control Teams, comprising 2 700 Hawker Control Officers and some 1 000 workmen and other supporting staff. They were required to control and contain on-street hawking activities, manage licensed hawker pitches and take law enforcement actions against illegal hawking, with the aim to protecting public health and maintaining a clean and hygienic environment. In assessing the cost-effectiveness of the financial provision for hawker control, consideration should be given to the end results, such as the number of successful enforcement actions taken and the number of hawker blackspots reduced, and not just the average cost per hawker. Members considered that the present hawker-control arrangements might not be the most cost-effective means to tackle the problem of hawkers. They urged the Administration to examine other more effective measures and to ensure that the expenditure on hawker control was value for money.

Review of licensing system of food premises

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11.12 As regards members' concern about the progress of the review of the licensing system of food premises, DFEH responded that two rounds of consultation with the industry had been conducted and their feedback was still awaited. Meanwhile, a number of measures had been agreed with the Fire Services Department and Buildings Department to streamline the licensing procedures, including computerisation of records to facilitate record searching and designating of a case manager to follow up each application. As a result of these measures, the time required for issuing a provisional licence would be shortened to 6 - 8 weeks. DFEH assured members that FEHD was committed to improving the efficiency of its services. Upon receipt of the feedback from the industry, FEHD would draw up its finalized proposal and identify the areas in which legislative support would be required.

Labelling of genetically modified food

11.13 On the progress of the study on labelling of genetically modified food (GMF), SEF advised that the latest international trends in dealing with GMF were being reviewed to determine what sort of labelling system that should be established in Hong Kong. The Administration planned to report the progress of the study to the relevant LegCo Panels in June 2000 and to complete the study by early 2001. A paper for public consultation on the way forward would then be issued. Meanwhile, seminars would be organised and pamphlets would be issued to educate the public on the subject.

Fisheries loans

11.14 On the substantial decrease in the number of fisheries loans from 1 035 in 1998 and 1 166 in 1999 to 220 in 2000, the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation advised that under normal circumstances, the number of fisheries loans was around 200 per year. Most of the fisheries loans granted in 1998 and 1999 were one-off special loans made to mariculturists who were affected by the red tide incident during March-April 1998 and to fishermen who were affected by the fishing moratorium in South China Sea during June-July 1999 respectively. As fishermen were given very short notice of the fishing moratorium when it was first introduced in 1999, the Government offered financial assistance to them by offering the one-off special loans. However,

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fishermen had been reminded to prepare themselves for the fishing moratorium to be implemented this year and the following years and that no further special loans would be offered to them by the Government.

Targets and indicators of FEHD for 1998 and 1999

11.15 At members' request, SEF undertook to provide the targets and indicators of the programme areas currently under FEHD, and formerly under the two Provisional Municipal Councils, for the years 1998 and 1999 for members' reference.