

Grave sweepers urged to prevent hill fires

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) today (March 29) reminded people paying tribute to ancestors at graveyards in the countryside during the Ching Ming Festival period to exercise caution and prevent hill fires.

An AFCD spokesman said it is an offence under the Forests and Countryside Ordinance (Cap. 96) to burn offerings without considering fire risks or leave behind kindling in the countryside. Any person who contravenes the ordinance may be prosecuted and is liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and one year's imprisonment upon conviction.

The AFCD will deploy staff and enforcement officers to patrol graveyards in the countryside during the Ching Ming Festival period. Those who are found in breach of the law will be prosecuted.

The majority of hill fires in the countryside are caused by human negligence. Accidents can be prevented if grave sweepers follow some simple guidelines:

- * Remove weeds around the graves with tools and never burn weeds;
- * Burning should only be done inside a container or iron bucket;
- * Never leave burning offerings unattended; and
- * Make sure all kindling is put out before leaving.

The spokesman said that metal containers for burning offerings properly will be handed out to grave sweepers who have such a need at suitable locations in the country parks during the Ching Ming Festival. The AFCD will also deploy additional country park wardens to step up patrols at hill fire black spots.

Members of the public are reminded to keep the countryside clean. Before leaving, grave sweepers should not leave behind their offerings or rubbish. The AFCD issued fixed penalty notices to 77 persons for littering in country parks last year.

With a view to preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the community, the spokesman also appealed to the public to avoid grave sweeping during the peak period on the day of the Ching Ming Festival to avoid crowds to contain the spread of the virus. The public must comply with the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G).

Meanwhile, the spokesman reminded grave sweepers to maintain appropriate social distancing, avoid meal gatherings at worship sites or in crowded places and maintain good personal and environmental hygiene so as to lower the risk of disease transmission. He added that all country park barbecue

sites and campsites will remain closed until further notice.