

LCQ11: Fire safety of petrol filling stations

Following is a question by the Hon Frankie Yick and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (October 24):

Question:

Some members of the public have pointed out that it is a rather common phenomenon that drivers, taking no heed of the appeal of the staff of petrol filling stations, (i) use mobile phones within the area of petrol filling stations and (ii) fail to switch off the engines of vehicles being refuelled. Since a trace amount of petrol vapour is released from petrol dispensers into the environment during vehicle refuelling, these members of the public are worried that these two acts may cause a fire or an explosion, thus endangering public safety. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of complaints received by the Government in the past three years about the aforesaid two acts, and the follow-up actions taken;

(2) whether it will step up publicity to appeal to drivers to avoid committing these two acts; and

(3) whether it will enact legislation to regulate these two acts; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

To ensure public safety, the Fire Services Department (FSD) conducts fire safety risk assessments for petrol filling stations (PFSs). All explosion accidents, including those within PFSs, are caused by the ignition of a sufficient amount of inflammable vapour by sufficient amount of energy at the scene. In order to prevent such a situation from occurring, FSD puts in place relevant fire safety requirements when considering applications for the operation of PFSs, so as to ensure that there will be no leakage from the petrol filling system and prevent the accumulation of energy to a dangerous level within the areas of PFSs.

My response to the various parts of the Hon Frankie Yick's question is as follows:

(1) According to records, in the past three years, FSD did not receive any complaints against the use of mobile phones within the areas of PFSs or drivers failing to switch off the engines of vehicles being refuelled.

(2) and (3) Currently, FSD regulates the fire safety of PFSs through the licensing regime under the Dangerous Goods Ordinance (Cap. 295). FSD conducts fire safety risk assessments for PFSs and puts in place relevant fire safety requirements, including putting up "Switch Off Engine" warning signs at conspicuous locations in PFSs and requiring the staff of PFSs to request drivers to switch off their vehicle engines before refuelling. In addition, FSD conducts surprise inspections. If managers of PFSs are found to be in breach of relevant fire safety requirements, FSD will consider prosecution. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$10,000 and imprisonment for one month. The relevant dangerous goods licences of the PFS concerned may also be revoked.

According to FSD's assessment, given that the maximum amount of energy generated by a mobile phone is far lower than the ignition threshold of petrol vapour, the fire risk is relatively low. Having said that, in view of the variety of mobile phones and the constant emergence of new models, for the sake of prevention, FSD proposes putting up notices at conspicuous locations in PFSs to urge members of the public to avoid using mobile phones within PFSs. FSD will continue to monitor closely studies on the safety of using mobile phones and conduct reviews where necessary.

FSD has been reminding the oil industry through regular meetings to comply with the fire safety requirements, including that managers of PFSs should make sure that drivers have switched off the engines of the vehicles before refuelling. Managers should also avoid letting members of the public use mobile phones within PFSs. Moreover, FSD conducts surprise inspections and distributes fire safety leaflets at PFSs to enhance the fire safety awareness of the industry. Contents of the leaflets include reminding managers that no parking is allowed within PFSs, that drivers must switch off the engines of vehicles being refuelled, and that no smoking is allowed within PFSs etc.