

LCQ11: Impacts caused to the environment by anti-epidemic measures

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (May 27):

Question:

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic has been rampant in Hong Kong in recent months. Regarding the impacts caused to the environment by the various anti-epidemic measures adopted by members of the public, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) as pointed out by some press reports, the fact that discarded face masks can be seen everywhere in country parks in recent months shows that the problem of haphazard disposal of face masks by members of the public is serious, whether the Government has stepped up law enforcement; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (2) whether it has stepped up cleaning and disinfection work targeting refuse collection vehicles, refuse transfer stations and landfills; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) given that members of the public have, during the epidemic, dined out less frequently and made more takeaway orders, whether the Government has stepped up publicity among members of the public on bringing their own tableware and minimising the use of disposable tableware; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (4) how the quantity of disposable tableware disposed of in the first four months of this year compares with that in the same period of last year;
- (5) given that a number of villages have not been connected to public sewers and have only been installed with septic tank systems, and the effluent therefrom seeps through the surrounding soils which may eventually pollute rivers, whether the Government has stepped up efforts to call on the households concerned to avoid pouring undiluted bleach into toilet bowls; and
- (6) given that members of the public have used a large quantity of bleach for anti-epidemic purposes in recent months, whether the Government has assessed the impacts of such a situation on the ecological environment, and measured the changes in the concentrations of the relevant compounds in the seawater of the Victoria Harbour; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My specific reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Hak-kan is as follows:

(1) As many members of the public visit our countryside such as country parks in recent days, relevant departments including the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) have strengthened promotion efforts and taken follow-up actions. Taking the AFCD as an example, it has stepped up inspections and cleaning of venues through flexible deployment of manpower. At the same time, publicity work at various fronts has been enhanced, such as displaying publicity banners and posters in country parks with high visitor flow, urging countryside visitors to maintain environmental hygiene on radio programmes, and conveying relevant messages through the networks of partner organisations. When patrolling country trails, AFCD staff also remind hikers to bring their litter home and will take necessary enforcement action if littering (including reckless disposal of face masks) is found. For the first four months of this year, the AFCD prosecuted a total of 60 offenders for littering in country parks.

(2) At present, municipal solid waste (MSW) is mainly collected by refuse collection vehicles and then sent to landfills for disposal through refuse transfer stations. The process of waste handling at the transfer stations is mainly operated by machinery and the staff at the stations do not need to contact and handle the waste manually. The contractors of the transfer stations are required to regularly clean the waste tipping hall, the floor at the stations, the waste conveyor system and machinery, as well as the containers and trucks used for waste transfer, while all refuse collection vehicles are required to have their bodies washed before leaving the transfer stations and landfills so as to stay clean and hygienic. We have also strengthened anti-epidemic measures at the transfer stations and landfills, and have disseminated health information and guidelines from the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) under the Department of Health (DH) to the contractors and on-site staff at the transfer stations and landfills to keep them alert to environmental hygiene and anti-epidemic issues so as to fight the virus together.

In addition, to help the MSW transfer sector increase resources to enhance the provision of workers' personal protective equipment and strengthen the disinfection of refuse transport vehicles, the Environment Bureau has launched a scheme offering a one-off relief subsidy of \$8,000 to each eligible refuse transfer station account holder so as to support the sector in coping with the challenges, as well as curbing the risk of virus transmission and maintaining environmental hygiene.

(3) Amid the epidemic, we understand that more members of the public will opt for takeaways to avoid leaving home. That said, while we join hands in fighting the virus, we should also minimise the use of disposable tableware wherever practicable, such as not asking for plastic bags or disposable tableware when ordering takeaways. Meanwhile, the EPD and the Environmental

Campaign Committee have put forward a number of promotion initiatives. They include:

- using social media such as Facebook and Instagram to remind the public to go green in fighting the virus, and holding online activities to encourage them to practise the idea of "Plastic-Free Takeaway";
- disseminating the message of "plastic-and-disposable-free" via various online platforms and mobile applications (e.g. HK01, on.cc, OpenRice and Yahoo.com) as well as bus/tram/outdoor advertising;
- proactively arranging with property management companies and the Housing Department to display publicity posters in both private and public housing estates to urge members of the public to practise "Plastic-Free Takeaway" in daily lives for joint efforts in waste reduction; and
- launching programmes themed on plastic-free and other green practices via different channels such as TV stations (e.g. TVB and ViuTV), online social platforms and video sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube and the ViuTV mobile application), thereby providing the public with everyday guidelines on waste reduction during the epidemic to foster the culture of "Food Wise" and "Waste Reduction" and promote less use of disposable plastic tableware, so that all sectors of the community will stay green while fighting the virus.

(4) It is not the right timing to conduct any survey on waste separation in order to reduce the risk of spreading of the virus. We are thus unable to confirm whether the quantity of disposable plastic tableware disposed of is increasing. However, the overall disposal volume of MSW in Hong Kong in the past four months has slightly decreased as compared with the same period last year. Our preliminary analysis is that this might be related to the overall drop in economic activities in recent months.

(5) The CHP under the DH has issued a guideline on the use of bleach (www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/the_use_of_bleach.pdf), which advises that 1:99 diluted bleach should be used for general household cleaning and disinfection, and that overuse of bleach will pollute the environment and disturb ecological balance and should thus be avoided.

(6) When going through sewerage systems, used household bleach will be largely diluted and the residual chlorine therein will also undergo chemical reactions with organic substances in the pipelines and be degraded, thus causing no adverse impact to the marine ecology in general. According to the water quality monitoring data collected for the first quarter of 2020, the overall state of Hong Kong's marine waters and rivers is comparable to that of the same period in the past and no abnormality has been detected in the

water quality of the Victoria Harbour.