

LCQ6: Handling of waste styrofoam boxes

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (May 18):

Question:

It has been reported that due to the severe epidemic situation in Hong Kong, the Mainland authorities have, since early February this year, refused to take back the styrofoam boxes which have been used for carrying vegetables supplied to Hong Kong, in a bid to reduce the risk of spreading the epidemic. This has led to a phenomenon of "styrofoam box sieges" in many districts in Hong Kong, with the situation in markets being particularly severe, and caused problems of hygiene, street obstructions and fire hazards. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has estimated the current daily number of styrofoam boxes transported to Hong Kong along with vegetables supplied to Hong Kong, and whether it has assessed the pollution caused to the environment and the ocean by such styrofoam boxes; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (2) of the measures in place to handle the aforesaid substantially increased waste styrofoam boxes, and the current daily number of such waste styrofoam boxes handled by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department; whether the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has assisted in handling such waste styrofoam boxes; if so, of the details, and whether the EPD will play a more active role in this; if the EPD has not, the reasons for that; and
- (3) as it is learnt that at present the Missing Link – Polyfoam Recycling Scheme funded by the Government and the pilot scheme on waste plastics collection and recycling under the EPD are far from adequate to recycle the aforesaid additional waste styrofoam boxes, whether the Government will support more recycling projects on local waste styrofoam boxes; if so, of the target recovery rate; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Styrofoam boxes for supplying vegetables to Hong Kong were generally returned to the Mainland for reuse in the past. However, due to the epidemic recently, the relevant transport chain of reused styrofoam boxes has been interrupted. To this end, the Government has stepped up inter-departmental collaboration and adopted a multi-pronged approach, with a view to reducing their impact on Hong Kong's environmental hygiene. The Government has been tackling the problem on three fronts. Firstly, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation

Department (AFCD) are speeding up and increasing the frequency of handling of abandoned styrofoam boxes to reduce the impact on environmental hygiene on the street. Secondly, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), in addition to supporting proper handling of styrofoam boxes at refuse transfer stations (RTSs) and landfills, has also actively liaised with and provide support to more local recyclers to increase our relevant local recycling capacity when it is cost-effective. Thirdly, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), the AFCD and the EPD are actively liaising with the relevant Mainland units, under the premise of epidemic prevention and control, to explore the possibility of formulating a set of mutually-agreed solutions, including making arrangement on workflow and standard for disinfection of styrofoam boxes so as to allow these disinfected styrofoam boxes to resume returning to the Mainland for reuse, thereby alleviating the problem at source.

The consolidated reply to the questions raised by the Hon Chan is as follows:

Styrofoam boxes are commonly used for daily supplies of vegetables and fruits to Hong Kong and could be reused across the boundary before the epidemic, with good market values. The trade estimates that there are currently some 120 000 styrofoam boxes entering Hong Kong every day, with a total of about 48 tonnes. Currently, the FEHD cleans up an average of about 40 000 to 50 000 styrofoam boxes every day. Moreover, the AFCD and other private contractors have also disposed of other relevant styrofoam boxes. Meanwhile, some styrofoam boxes are handled and recycled through local recyclers.

As the cross-boundary reuse of these styrofoam boxes cannot be resumed temporarily at the moment, the EPD has rendered support through different channels, including the Environment and Conservation Fund and the Recycling Fund, to more local styrofoam recycling projects. The EPD has liaised with a number of local recyclers and collaborated with them providing support to raise their styrofoam boxes recycling capacity in the short-term. The overall recycling capacity of styrofoam boxes will thus be significantly increased to a total of around seven tonnes per day. In addition, the EPD through the AFCD, has launched a pilot scheme to provide reusable plastic containers to the trade for trial use in four wholesale markets, so as to encourage the trade to adapt to using reusable plastic containers for food delivery, thereby reducing the reliance on styrofoam boxes at source.

The FEHD has also stepped up refuse collection services to clean up the abandoned styrofoam boxes in a timely manner. The FEHD has proactively posted notices providing the locations of nearby refuse collection points for the public to dispose of refuse properly. In parallel, the FEHD has also strengthened law enforcement to combat illegal waste disposal. From February 14 to May 1 this year, the FEHD has issued some 800 fixed penalty notices at various locations where styrofoam boxes were disposed of.

Regarding the RTSs, the EPD has timely collaborated with the FEHD and other stakeholders, including enhancing the efficiency of cleaning up and diverting some of these styrofoam waste vehicles away from busy RTSs.

Styrofoam cannot be decomposed readily and will affect the marine ecosystem once it enters the marine environment accidentally. The EPD has been monitoring the marine environment and so far has not observed any increase in styrofoam refuse at sea recently.

On the whole, the Government has stepped up inter-departmental collaboration and adopted a multi-pronged approach, in order to further resolve the problem at source. The FHB, the AFCD and the EPD will continue to liaise with the relevant Mainland units to explore different effective ways to deal with the challenges of the current epidemic and take forward the work jointly.

Thank you, President.