

LCQ8: Wetland Buffer Area

Following is a question by the Hon Lau Kwok-fan and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

In early years the Government demarcated and designated a strip of land of about 500 metres in width covering about 1 000 hectares along the boundary of the Deep Bay Wetland Conservation Area (WCA) as a Wetland Buffer Area (WBA). No development project may commence in WBA unless an ecological impact assessment has been conducted with the assessment outcome being that the development project will not cause any insurmountable adverse impacts. There have been comments that as the freshwater fish farming industry has declined in recent years, quite a number of fish ponds in WBA have been left deserted at present. In view of this, the Government should conduct a re-planning of WBA to unleash the development potential of the lands concerned and optimise the utilisation of land resources. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether, since the Study on the Ecological Value of Fish Ponds in the Deep Bay Area was completed in 1997, the Government has conducted studies on the ecological value of the fish ponds in that area and conducted reviews of the policies on the protection of WCA and WBA; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that, and whether it will conduct such studies and reviews; if so, of the timetable and details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will reduce the coverage of WBA to release those lands therein with relatively low ecological value for housing or other development uses; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) given that at present, certain sites in WBA, albeit having been successfully rezoned as residential sites, may be used only for low-density residential developments due to the plot ratio restriction, resulting in underutilisation of land resources, whether the Government will consider raising the plot ratio of the residential sites in WBA from the current figure of 0.2 to 0.4 to 2 to 3, with a view to increasing housing supply and at the same time encouraging, through providing incentives, developers to revitalise, with a new mindset, the fish ponds surrounding development projects in WBA, so as to strike a balance between development and conservation?

Reply:

President,

The importance of the wetland ecosystems in the Mai Po Marshes, Inner Deep Bay and adjacent areas (Deep Bay Area) was established as early as in early 1990s. The Deep Bay Area was listed as a Wetland of International

Importance under the Ramsar Convention in 1995. Its main habitats include fish ponds, mudflats, mangroves and gei wais (tidal shrimp ponds). These wetlands serve as the main places for migratory birds to spend the winter or stop over, and provide foraging and roosting habitats for various species of waterbirds.

To ensure against any adverse impacts from large-scale developments on the wetland ecosystem of the Deep Bay Area, the Town Planning Board (TPB) laid down in 1993 the TPB Planning Guidelines No. 12 (Planning Guidelines) to regulate developments within the Area. Revisions were subsequently made to the Planning Guidelines in 1994, 1999 and 2014, and the version currently in force is Planning Guidelines No.12C promulgated in 2014.

After consulting the Environmental Protection Department and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) on the various parts of the Hon Lau's question, my reply is as follows:

(1) The Government completed the Study on the Ecological Value of Fish Ponds in the Deep Bay Area (the Study) in 1997. The Study confirmed the unique importance of the fish pond system in the area in providing foraging and roosting habitats for various species of waterbirds. In view of the recommendations of the Study, revisions were made to the Planning Guidelines in 1999, delineating the Wetland Conservation Area (WCA) and the Wetland Buffer Area (WBA). Adjoining fish ponds in the Deep Bay Area were designated as WCA. Except for developments required to support the conservation of the ecological value of the area, all existing fish ponds are to be conserved. In addition, an area of about 500 metres wide along the landward boundary of the WCA was designated as the WBA, the intention of which is to protect the ecological integrity of the wetland within the WCA and ensure against disturbance on the WCA caused by developments in the vicinity. Following the ecological field survey of Hoo Hok Wai, the TPB further designated Hoo Hok Wai as part of the WCA and WBA, as well as updated the Planning Guidelines in 2014.

For the purposes of understanding the conditions and changes of the wetland habitats, the AFCD has been conducting the Waterbird Monitoring Programme at the Ramsar Site and the Deep Bay Area every year since 1997, as well as the Baseline Ecological Monitoring Project in such areas every year since 2001. According to the long-term ecological monitoring undertaken by the AFCD in the Deep Bay Area, no substantial ecological changes have been found in the Area. Against this background, the Government has no intention to review the existing WCA at this stage.

(2) and (3) As regards the WBA, its nature is to buffer the negative disturbances of developments on the wetlands in the WCA, but not to prohibit development at all. In fact, over 40 per cent (i.e. around 513 hectares) of land in the WBA falls within land-use zones that allow residential developments according to the outline zoning plan, including "Other Specified Uses (Comprehensive Development to include Wetland Restoration Area)", "Comprehensive Development Area", "Residential (Group B)", "Residential (Group C)", "Residential (Group D)" and "Village Type Development". For any

new development/redevelopment project in the WBA, an ecological impact assessment report showing that such development would not have any environmental interference to the WCA must be submitted. At present, the plot ratio restrictions for the WBA range generally from 0.2 to 0.4 according to the relevant outline zoning plan, but the existing planning mechanism does provide a channel for application to the TPB for relaxing the plot ratio restrictions for residential developments in the areas concerned. The TPB has also been considering planning applications on the basis of individual merits. As a matter of fact, in some of the zones with current developments and developments with planning permissions, plot ratios may range from 1.5 to 3.

Having said the above, in view of the ever changing planning circumstances and social needs, the Government will review the Planning Guidelines relating to the WBA on the premise of balancing the needs for conservation and increase of housing land supply. The Chief Executive announced in her 2020 Policy Address that the remit of the Steering Group on Streamlining Development Control coordinated by the Development Bureau will be expanded to review more comprehensively the development approval processes for both Government and private projects, and to rationalise the development-related requirements imposed by different bureaux. The review on the WBA is carried out under this framework, and our target is to put forward recommendations on whether and how to revise the Planning Guidelines within this year.