

LCQ9: Impact of extreme weather and unforeseen incidents on agriculture and fisheries industry

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (July 5):

Question:

Quite a number of fishermen and farmers have relayed that the protection mechanisms in relation to the agriculture and fisheries industry in Hong Kong lag behind those in other regions, resulting in a lack of support for operators in the industry and their difficulties in coping with the impacts brought about by extreme weather and unforeseen incidents. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has assessed the amount of losses incurred by the agriculture and fisheries industry due to extreme weather or unforeseen incidents in each of the past three years; if so, of the assessment method; if not, the reasons for that;
- (2) of the details of follow-up actions taken and support provided by the Government for fishermen and farmers affected by extreme weather or unforeseen incidents in the past three years;
- (3) of the Government's measures put in place to issue emergency notifications to fishermen and farmers and assist them in coping with extreme weather or unforeseen incidents (such as the large-scale power outage incident in some areas in Northwest New Territories);
- (4) whether the Government will consider carrying out reforms of the existing mechanism in respect of the primary producer grants under the Emergency Relief Fund by putting such grants under the administration of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, which has good understanding of the relevant industry, and raising the amount of the grants, or introducing related insurance schemes that meet the needs of the industry; and
- (5) given that some members of the industry have relayed that at present, most operators in the industry can only maintain low-cost production or extensive farming operations due to the short tenancy tenures of farmland and the difficulties involved when making applications for agricultural structures, of the Government's new approaches in place to support the agriculture and fisheries industry in enhancing their production equipment and technologies, and whether it has plans to put forward the relevant proposals when formulating the blueprint for the sustainable development of

agriculture and fisheries, so as to mitigate the impacts brought about by extreme weather or unforeseen incidents on them?

Reply:

President,

Regarding the Hon Steven Ho's question, my reply to the question is as follows:

(1) and (2) In the case of extreme weather (e.g. typhoons or prolonged hot weather) or unforeseen incidents (e.g. red tides) which may affect the agriculture and fisheries industries, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) will quickly deploy staff members to conduct site inspections and evaluate the damages caused to agricultural lands across the territory, and maintain close liaison with fishermen to monitor the conditions of fish farms and fish culture zones. In severe cases, the AFCD will activate the Emergency Relief Fund (ERF) and issue primary producer grants in accordance with the Emergency Relief Fund Ordinance (Cap. 1103), with a view to providing support to affected fishermen/farmers to resume operations as soon as possible. Grants from the ERF are intended for relief rather than compensation.

In general, for farmlands or fish farms suffering from severe damage (i.e. at least one-third of the farmland or fish farm has been damaged), the AFCD and relevant departments will evaluate the extent of affected area and financial losses when calculating payments of grants, based on different modes of operation. For example, for the agriculture and aquaculture industries, evaluations will be made mainly based on factors such as the production area and volume, whilst for capture fisheries, evaluations will be based on the values and depreciation rates of vessels and fishing gear.

In the past three years (2020, 2021 and 2022), 29 applications from the fisheries industry were approved, with grants of over \$1.9 million issued, whilst 2 929 applications from the agriculture industry were approved, with grants of over \$8.63 million issued.

(3) In the case of extreme weather or unforeseen incidents, shortly after receiving relevant information, the AFCD will notify fishermen/farmers and relevant organisations via short message service (SMS), reminding them to take necessary measures. The AFCD will also release updated information and where necessary, issue press releases to promulgate relevant information.

Furthermore, the AFCD has been providing technical support to the industries to safeguard against extreme weather or unforeseen incidents. For instance, for the agriculture industry, in response to the prolonged hot weather in recent years, the AFCD has deployed staff to visit major crop production areas to advise farmers on measures to protect crops from the heat; for the fisheries industry, to minimise the impact of red tides on fish farmers, the AFCD issues red tide warnings and advises them on suitable mitigation measures, such as increasing oxygen content in the water and relocating fish rafts in a timely manner.

(4) The ERF is a trust fund established under the Emergency Relief Fund Ordinance, with the Director of Social Welfare as the trustee of the fund. The responsibility for approving primary producer grants and making payments under the ERF is vested with the AFCD. The purpose of the ERF is to provide emergency financial relief, such as assisting affected fishermen/farmers to purchase the supplies required to resume operations and pay additional wages. The Government has been adjusting the amount of grants (including the primary producer grants) under the ERF on an annual basis, having regard to the industries' operational circumstances and changes in wages and other expenditures. In addition, fishermen/farmers affected by natural disasters may apply for loans under various loan schemes under the AFCD, such as the Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Loan Fund and the Fish Marketing Organisation Loan Fund, to re-establish their business. We understand that due to the small scale of operations of the agricultural and fisheries industries in Hong Kong, there is a lack of commercially viable insurance schemes in the market.

(5) To facilitate the industries to apply to the Lands Department (LandsD) to erect agricultural structures, the AFCD and relevant departments launched the "One-stop Service" arrangement in August 2022, under which applications for the erection of agricultural structures are processed by the AFCD to assist the LandsD to expedite vetting of applications. The AFCD will also co-ordinate with relevant departments and strengthen the monitoring of application progress, so as to shorten the required time as much as possible.

In addition, the Environment and Ecology Bureau and the AFCD are working hand in hand with the industries to formulate a blueprint for the sustainable development of agriculture and fisheries, and plan to roll out an array of measures in phases to raise the quality and value of local produces, as well as the productivity of the industries. Some of the measures under the blueprint can help the industries to better deal with extreme weather. For example, the AFCD is promoting the use of deep sea cages that can withstand strong wind, waves and ocean currents in new fish culture zones to fishermen for fish culture, and actively promoting the use of greenhouses and indoor hydroponics and other production techniques to farmers.

Fishermen/farmers may also apply for the Farm Improvement Scheme or the Equipment Improvement Project under the Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund or Sustainable Fisheries Development Fund respectively, to obtain financial assistance to acquire fishery/farming equipment and materials, which can help them take appropriate measures to deal with special weather conditions.