

Proposed non-in-situ land exchange for long-term conservation of Sha Lo Tung proceeds

A Government spokesman said today (February 10) that the Chief Executive in Council gave approval on February 9 to the Government to proceed with the proposed non-in-situ land exchange in Sha Lo Tung (SLT) for its long-term conservation. The Government will continue to follow up with the Sha Lo Tung Development Company Limited (SLTDC) on the latter phase of the land exchange for the actual implementation.

SLT has a very high ecological value and ranks second among the 12 priority sites requiring enhanced conservation under the New Nature Conservation Policy, behind only the internationally important wetlands in Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay. It has diverse habitats such as fung shui wood and an "ecologically important stream" as well as enjoying a reputation for being a sanctuary for dragonflies. SLT is a prime habitat for dragonflies, butterflies, fireflies, freshwater fish, amphibians, birds, etc, and nurtures many rare and endangered species. Active conservation management in SLT is therefore necessary for the prevention of habitat degradation and damage.

For the long-term conservation of SLT, the Chief Executive in Council gave in-principle agreement in June 2017 to the Government to grant an area of land at the Shuen Wan Restored Landfill (SWRL) in Tai Po to the SLTDC for developing a private golf course in exchange for its surrender of the ecologically important private land in SLT to the Government. The conditions include the payment of a land premium assessed at full market value and the provision of at least 20 per cent of tee-times by the SLTDC at the proposed private golf course for public use, etc.

As with other restored landfill sites, the land use of the SWRL is extremely limited because it cannot accommodate excessive loading as a result of differential ground settlement of the land. Due to issues related to loading, prohibition of excavation works, maintenance and repair works, etc, restored landfill sites are mostly used as parks or other recreational means. The SWRL has in fact been planned as a golf course development in the Tai Po Outline Zoning Plan.

After about three years of negotiation, the Government has largely reached a consensus with the SLTDC on the basic terms and conditions to be incorporated into the proposed non-in-situ land exchange. The land title checking for the private lots to be surrendered by the SLTDC under the established procedures is also close to completion. In 2019, the SLTDC also completed the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the proposed development of a private golf course at the SWRL in accordance with the requirements of the EIA Ordinance (Cap. 499) and was issued an Environmental Permit.

When the proposed land exchange is completed, together with the land owned by the Government at SLT and the land to be conserved in collaboration with the SLTDC, the total area available to the Government for long-term conservation there will be over 50 hectares. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) or a non-governmental organisation engaged by the AFCD will be responsible for the long-term management and conservation of the SLT habitats. The AFCD will formulate an appropriate nature conservation and management plan for the protection of important habitats, restoration of abandoned agriculture land, enhancement of the ecological value of secondary woodlands, maintaining the habitat diversity, removal of exotic species, etc. These actions will contribute to the effective conservation of biodiversity in SLT and enhance its ecological connection with the country park in the vicinity. The AFCD will also set up facilities like educational signage in suitable locations and maintain existing trails where necessary to facilitate the public's appreciation and enjoyment of the ecology and environment of SLT. Public education activities will be organised to give visitors a better understanding of the biodiversity and cultural heritage there, and raise public awareness of and community participation in the conservation of SLT.

The Government will continue to take forward the work of the latter phase of the land exchange with the SLTDC. As mentioned above, the SLTDC is required to pay a land premium assessed at full market value by the Lands Department in accordance with established procedures, which will reflect the market value of the SWRL as a private golf course. After the completion of the entire land exchange, relevant land exchange documents will be registered in the Land Registry and made available for public inspection, including the amount of the premium paid. The SLTDC is also required to obtain all necessary approvals before commencing the proposed golf course development project at the SWRL.

The spokesman reiterated that the proposed non-in-situ land exchange is a very unique, exceptional and isolated case. It is an arrangement made under the consideration of the concurrent existence of a combination of special circumstances in SLT, which includes the very high ecological value of the land there and its much needed active conservation, the ownership of the private land in SLT being largely unified under one entity, the lack of ecologically less sensitive land in SLT for appropriate development by the SLTDC, and a restored landfill site planned for a golf course development in the same district in Tai Po available for the purpose of a non-in-situ land exchange. The Government will not lightly consider this approach for the purpose of nature conservation.