

China plans huge spending on farmland improvement

China plans huge spending to improve farmland quality in the next few years in hopes of propping up grain supplies as shrinking arable land has put the populous country under pressure to feed its people.

A total of 600 billion yuan (around 88 billion U.S. dollars) will be pumped into the field by 2020, Han Jun, deputy director of the central agricultural work leading team office, said on Tuesday at a press conference.

The central and local governments will provide the funds, Han said, adding that he hopes the efforts will also attract private investment.

It was the latest move in a nationwide official program to build "high-standard cropland," which, according to official documents, refers to large-scale, contiguous plots of land with fertile soil and modern farming facilities. This type of farmland can maintain stable and high yields and has sound ecological condition and strong capacity to resist natural disasters.

China improved around 26.87 million hectares of farmland to meet those standards from 2011 to 2015. The Ministry of Land and Resources estimates there will be a 10- to 20-percent rise in grain production capacity.

With the new investment plan, improvement of another 26.67 million hectares can be completed by 2020, Han said, adding the government will try to hit 40 million hectares.

China's arable land reserves have been falling in recent years, some occupied by construction of new homes and factories and some replanted with trees and grass for ecological protection. The phenomenon, along with the first drop in grain output in more than a decade last year, has added to concerns about food security.

The country still had a shortfall of about 20 million tonnes in the amount of grain it produced and consumed, according to official calculations.

China is eyeing the farmland-improvement program to help boost grain yields and modernize agriculture.

Efforts must be made to stabilize farmland area and improve its quality to ensure grain self-sufficiency and food security, according to a document released Monday by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council.

The document demanded more efforts to replenish, as much arable land is currently occupied by non-agricultural construction.

China aims to retain at least 124.33 million hectares of arable land in 2020, and the figure was 133.3 million hectares at the end of 2015. The government

has set a warning level of 120 million hectares and reiterated the level must not be breached.

The arable land should be protected “the way we protect pandas,” according to the document.

Central China province reports new H7N9 case

Another human H7N9 avian flu case has been reported in central China’s Hunan Province, bringing the total number of infections in the province to 16, including five fatalities, this year.

The female patient, 37, was diagnosed in Yueyang City Monday. She had contact with poultry before falling ill and is in critical condition, according to the Hunan provincial disease control and prevention center.

People who had close contact with the patient have not shown symptoms of fever or coughing.

In addition to Hunan, human H7N9 infections have also been reported in the provinces of Guangdong, Guizhou, Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi and Shandong, as well as in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Macao.

H7N9 is a bird flu strain first reported to have infected humans in March 2013 in China. It is most likely to strike in winter and spring.

Shanghai seeks ways to promote smoking ban

Political advisers in Shanghai have proposed the city learn from other cities about publicizing the smoking ban that will take effect in five weeks.

Beginning March 1, all public indoor venues and work areas, as well as some outdoor places, such as art performance and sporting venues, open areas at maternity and infant hospitals, kindergartens and bus stops in Shanghai will become nonsmoking zones to shield nonsmokers from secondhand smoke.

But the current anti-smoking advertisements in the city are far from enough, said some local political advisers during their annual gathering last week.

“In Singapore, smoking bans with pictures, such as broken cigarette butts and children covering their mouths and noses surrounded by smoke, are very commonly seen in the streets to gain people’s attention,” said Wang Xinmei, a member of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Shanghai’s political advisory body.

“Beijing also did a good job informing the public of its smoking ban, which became effective in June 2015. On all the flights and trains bound for Beijing there are repeat broadcasts of the smoking ban, which seems powerful, and Shanghai can learn from that,” said Wang, who is also chairwoman of the Jinshan district branch of the city’s political advisory body.

Gwan Tat-cheong, a Hongkonger and another political adviser in Shanghai, said Shanghai may look to Hong Kong, where smoking indoors has been prohibited since 2007. Publicity of the smoking ban is ubiquitous in public venues and on different communication channels throughout the city, and the notifications also highlight the cost that violators face.

“It always states clearly that errant smokers can be slapped with fines of HK\$1,500 (\$193),” said Gwan, who is also a senior adviser at the Bank of East Asia (China) Ltd.

Severe punishment for violators in the first few days after the regulation takes effect may also serve as a powerful deterrent, said the political advisers. Individuals caught smoking in forbidden areas will be fined from 50 to 200 yuan, and organizations that fail to stop smokers will be fined up to 30,000 yuan, according to the new regulation.

Wu Fan, director of the Shanghai Center for Disease Control, said: “Any new regulation, such as the citywide fireworks and firecrackers ban since the beginning of last year, faces challenges when it first comes into being, but it’ll become easier when a consensus is formed in the whole society.”

China is the world’s largest consumer and producer of tobacco. World Health Organization statistics showed that there are more than 300 million smokers in the country, accounting for almost one-third of the world’s total.

[Outdoor workers need protection from pollution](#)

People who must work outdoors on heavily polluted days are in dire need of labor protections, Worker’s Daily reported.

Wang Hongtao, a food deliveryman in Beijing, said he receives 30 percent more orders on smoggy days, as people tend to stay home due to personal health concerns.

China's online food delivery company ele.me showed a 39 percent increase in orders on Dec. 16, when Beijing issued a red alert for air pollution, compared to Dec. 14, when the air was good.

A courier named Zhang said his salary depends on the number of packages he delivers, so he cannot afford to stop working when the weather is bad.

Sanitation workers and traffic police are also among those who continue working outdoors on polluted days, yet labor protection for such workers remains poor.

Ma Jingjing, a lawyer in Beijing, said smog can cause irreversible harm to humans, yet some laborers have a poor awareness of the health hazards. Ma said it is necessary for authorities to include professional dust masks among the standard equipment for outdoor workers.

Ma also called for a shortening of outdoor work hours when the air is polluted, or for higher pay on smoggy days.

Zhang Yimin, a political advisor in Ningbo City of Zhejiang Province, also proposed the adoption of flexible hours on polluted days.

It can be hard to directly attribute negative health impacts to smog exposure. This poses a challenge when it comes to verifying smog as a reason for occupational diseases.

Health expert Zhou Shenglai, with the Chinese Hospital Association, says diseases caused by exhaust fumes and smog should be included on the list of occupational diseases for sanitation workers and traffic officers.

[Former oil chief sentenced for graft](#)

Wang Tianpu, former general manager of oil giant China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec Group), was sentenced Tuesday to 15 and a half years in prison for graft.

The sentence was handed down by the Nanchang City Intermediate People's Court in east China's Jiangxi Province.

The court also imposed a fine of 3.2 million yuan (around 468,300 U.S. dollars) on Wang and ordered all his illicit gains to be confiscated.

The court found that from 2003 to 2014, Wang took advantage of his various positions to help others with business operations, project undertaking and job placement. He asked for and illegally accepted money and property worth over 33.4 million yuan and illegally possessed state-owned assets worth almost 800,000 yuan, according to the court.

The court showed leniency, taking into consideration his confession, remorse and the fact that he voluntarily turned over all his proceeds.