

September's monthly gravidtrap index for Aedes albopictus mosquitoes drops further

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) today (October 18) announced that the monthly gravidtrap index for Aedes albopictus mosquitoes in September dropped further to 4.5 per cent from 5.8 per cent in August and was at Level 1 at its lowest, indicating that the distribution of Aedes albopictus mosquitoes in the areas surveyed was not extensive.

In September, among the 64 survey areas, there was only one area (Sheung Shui) with the area gravidtrap index exceeding the alert level of 20 per cent. The gravidtraps in the district concerned were mostly located in the vicinity of private residential areas, schools, recreational and sports facilities and public places. The FEHD has collaborated with relevant government departments by taking immediate action to strengthen mosquito prevention and control work in the area concerned. The first phase gravidtrap index in the district concerned in October has dropped significantly to a lower level at 5.2 per cent.

Moreover, the monthly density index for Aedes albopictus in September remained at 1.1, which represented that an average of 1.1 Aedes albopictus adults were found in the Aedes-positive gravidtraps, indicating that the number of adult Aedes albopictus was not abundant in the survey areas. The gravidtrap and density indices for Aedes albopictus in different survey areas as well as information on mosquito prevention and control measures are available on the department's website at www.fehd.gov.hk.

A spokesman for the FEHD said, "The Government is very concerned about mosquito infestation. The FEHD has continued to intensify mosquito prevention and control work with relevant government departments in areas under their purview, including eliminating mosquito breeding places, applying larvicides, conducting fogging operations to eradicate adult mosquitoes, and placing mosquito trapping devices at suitable locations. The FEHD has also conducted site inspections with relevant departments, and provided them with professional advice and technical support to assist them in formulating and implementing effective anti-mosquito measures swiftly. At the same time, the FEHD has strengthened publicity and education. Under the concerted efforts and collaboration of various parties, the index in September dropped further. The FEHD will continue to monitor the mosquito infestation in all districts, and will conduct prompt and effective mosquito prevention and control work."

The FEHD will conduct a three-phase Anti-mosquito Campaign this year. The third phase of the territory-wide campaign, lasting 12 weeks, was launched on August 7 and will run until October 27. During the period, the district offices of the FEHD will target areas that have drawn particular concern, such as public markets, cooked food centres and hawker bazaars, single-block buildings, streets and back lanes, common parts of buildings,

village houses, construction sites, vacant sites and road works sites, to remove accumulated water and carry out mosquito prevention and control work. To further enhance the effectiveness of mosquito control, the FEHD and relevant government departments have also carried out the second phase of the All-out Anti-mosquito Operations since April 24 to focus on eliminating potential mosquito breeding places, and called on property management offices to arrange necessary repairs to their premises so as to minimise mosquito breeding places. Furthermore, intense adult control has been conducted by means of regular ultra-low volume fogging operations after the onset of the rainy season.

In view of the possible occurrence of new collections of stagnant water in the aftermath of rainstorms or tropical cyclones, the FEHD appeals to members of the public to work together to carry out mosquito prevention and control measures early, including inspecting their homes and surroundings to remove potential breeding grounds, changing water in vases and scrubbing their inner surfaces, removing water in saucers under potted plants at least once a week, properly disposing of containers such as soft drink cans and lunch boxes, and drilling large holes in unused tyres. The FEHD also advises members of the public and estate management bodies to keep drains free of blockage and level all defective ground surfaces to prevent the accumulation of water. They should also scrub all drains and surface sewers with an alkaline detergent at least once a week to remove any mosquito eggs.

Aedes albopictus is a kind of mosquito that can transmit dengue fever (DF). DF is commonly found in tropical and subtropical regions of the world, and has become endemic in many countries in Southeast Asia. The dengue activity in neighbouring areas has remained high and Hong Kong has recorded 38 imported DF cases so far this year. Members of the public should stay vigilant and continue to carry out effective mosquito prevention and control measures.

LCQ19: Fraud cases involving loans or grants to support enterprises

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Kennedy Wong and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Innovation, Technology and Industry, Ms Lillian Cheong, in the Legislative Council today (October 18):

Question:

It has been reported that a number of recent fraud cases have involved the use of false instruments to fraudulently obtain loans or grants provided by the Government to support enterprises, including those under the Special 100% Loan Guarantee, the Dedicated Fund on Branding, Upgrading and Domestic Sales, the Technology Voucher Programme and the Distance Business Programme.

In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of the aforesaid fraud cases detected by the Police and the amount of money involved in each of the past three years; among such fraud cases, the number of persons being successfully convicted and the penalties imposed;

(2) among the fraud cases mentioned in (1), of the number of those in which the Police successfully intercepted the defrauded money and the amount of money involved;

(3) among the defrauded money mentioned in (1), of the percentage of the defrauded money involving the Special 100% Loan Guarantee in the total amount of loans approved under the scheme;

(4) whether it will review if there are loopholes in the existing procedures and mechanisms for vetting and approving applications under the aforesaid schemes and programmes; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) whether it knows if the Hong Kong Productivity Council has established a mechanism to conduct random checks or reviews of the applications for the relevant funding schemes and programmes; if it knows, of the details, including (i) the manpower involved in the related work and (ii) the number of cases of alleged misuse of funds, in each of the past five years?

Reply:

President,

The Government has all along been striving to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to revive and embrace new business opportunities, including exploring more diversified markets, through implementation of different measures. To ensure proper use of public money, stringent vetting mechanisms have been put in place under funding schemes of different government bureaux/departments to prevent abuse of funding and fraud. If the relevant government bureau/department/unit suspects that any applications or approved projects involve illegal act in obtaining funding, such cases will be referred to law enforcement agencies for handling.

Since the question involves policy purview of the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau and Security Bureau, having coordinated information from the relevant policy bureaux, a consolidated reply to the various parts of the question is provided as follows:

(1)and(2) The Police does not have a breakdown of the statistics on fraud cases related to Government loans or funding.

(3) As at end September 2023, a total of 64 697 applications for the Special 100% Guarantee Product under the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme (SFGS) have been approved, involving a loan amount of \$135.6 billion. Among them, 1 531 applications, involving a loan amount of \$4.1 billion, were found to be suspicious cases after approval. The HKMC Insurance Limited (HKMCI), the

administrator of the SFGS, has taken appropriate actions, including providing assistance to law enforcement agencies, taking legal actions and stopping borrowing enterprises from drawing down the loans. In collaboration with lending institutions and law enforcement agencies, the HKMCI has rejected or ceased to process 932 suspicious applications, involving a loan amount of \$3.14 billion. The HKMCI does not possess the statistics of the judicial proceedings involved in the aforementioned cases.

(4) To ensure proper use of public money, stringent vetting procedures have been put in place under the schemes mentioned in the question.

In respect of the Special 100% Guarantee Product under the SFGS, lending institutions are required to verify the eligibility of enterprises with their professional knowledge, judgement and due diligence, and submit the verified applications with the necessary documents to the HKMCI for final assessment and approval.

For the Dedicated Fund on Branding, Upgrading and Domestic Sales (BUD Fund), the Technology Voucher Programme (TVP) and the Distance Business Programme (D-Biz), the Hong Kong Productivity Council (HKPC), as the Secretariat, conducts the initial vetting of applications submitted by enterprises/organisations and reviews the relevant supporting documents to confirm if the applicants could fulfil the eligibility criteria and, having regard to actual circumstances and needs, follows up and verifies the contents of the application. The HKPC will not continue to process any applications submitted if it is found to contain inaccurate declaration or statement. For applications under the BUD Fund, the HKPC will submit applications to the Government's inter-departmental committee for vetting after initial screening. Subsequently, applications will be submitted to the Programme Management Committee (PMC) for consideration and approval. For applications under the TVP and the D-Biz, the HKPC will complete the initial assessment and submit them to the relevant vetting committees (the TVP Committee and the D-Biz Vetting Committee respectively) for consideration. Applications supported by the committees will be submitted to the Commissioner for Innovation and Technology for funding approval.

Upon project completion, the HKPC will review the project reports and other required documents submitted by the enterprises/organisations as well as the audited accounts as necessary. If needed, the HKPC will verify the contents with the relevant enterprises/organisations. For applications under the BUD Fund, the final payment will only be disbursed after all the project reports have been submitted to PMC for consideration. For applications under the TVP and the D-Biz Programme, all project reports must be submitted to relevant vetting committees for consideration and accepted by the Government and the HKPC before final disbursements are released. For any enterprises/organisations failing to implement the project or in breach of any provisions of the funding agreement, the HKPC may cease disbursing any part of the funding to them, and/or has the right to recoup all or part of the disbursed funding.

Overall speaking, relevant departments or secretariats will refer any suspected illegal cases identified to relevant law enforcement agencies for

follow up, and will actively cooperate with the related investigation work. The Government will continue to closely monitor the application process and operation of various funding schemes in order to timely review the effectiveness.

(5) The HKPC has put in place vigorous mechanisms to ensure that funding would only be disbursed if the projects comply with relevant requirements under the schemes. Please refer to our response to part (4) of the question for details.

The HKPC conducts on-site inspections of selected applications under the BUD Fund to guard against misuse of funds. Since the launch of the scheme (i.e. from June 2012) to end-September 2023, the HKPC has conducted on-site inspections of a total of 745 approved projects, among which 25 were terminated afterwards but the disbursed funding has yet to be returned by the enterprises. The Government and the HKPC will demand the return of disbursed funding from the enterprises that have received funding according to the established mechanism.

For the D-Biz Programme, the application was closed in October 2020. The HKPC reviewed all suspected cases and conducted random on-site inspections based on the risk-based principle. When processing the final reports submitted by applicants, the HKPC conducted random on-site inspections for more than 2 700 projects and referred 173 suspected cases to the law enforcement agencies for follow up.

Regarding the TVP, the HKPC has been appointed as the Secretariat of the TVP since June 2021. As part of the final report vetting process (i.e. completed projects), the HKPC will arrange on-site visits to premises of selected applicants before approval of final reports and fund disbursements. As at end-September 2023, the HKPC has already conducted random on-site visits for 509 projects. In the past, when reports of bid-rigging or fraud cases involving the TVP applications were received, the HKPC would review the related projects to identify whether there was any breach of provisions or conditions set out in the "TVP Guidance Notes for Applications" or the funding agreement, and whether there was preliminary evidence showing that the applicant had committed illegal act that would require referral to law enforcement agencies. Since June 2021, the HKPC has received 19 such reports, of which seven were referred to law enforcement agencies for follow up after reviewing the cases.

Regarding the manpower involved in the related work, the aforementioned monitoring work is part of the HKPC's regular work, such breakdown of figures on manpower deployment is not available.

LCQ4: Special education

Following is a question by the Hon Lillian Kwok and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (October 18):

Question:

According to the information from the Education Bureau (EDB), the number of students with special educational needs (SEN students) increased by around 30 per cent from the 2017-2018 school year to the 2021-2022 school year. On the other hand, the EDB launched a teacher professional development framework on integrated education (IE) in the 2007-2008 school year to offer Basic, Advanced and Thematic Courses to teachers. However, among the overall number of teachers in public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools in the 2021-2022 school year, only 47 per cent and 37 per cent of teachers have received special education training respectively. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the numbers of teachers in public sector primary and secondary schools who have completed the Basic, Advanced and Thematic Courses respectively since the 2017-2018 school year; whether it will review the contents of such courses and other relevant professional development courses; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will review the learning content of SEN students to enable them to adapt to the demands of society nowadays and further establish a career ladder for them; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will review the development of IE and the coverage of relevant subsidies, so as to cope with the demand arising from the continuous increase in the number of SEN students and support the parents and teachers of such students in facing pressure; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government has all along been attaching great importance to supporting students with special educational needs (SEN). In recent years, the expenditure on integrated education (IE) has increased by 147 per cent from about \$1.5 billion in the 2017-18 financial year to about \$3.7 billion in the 2022-23 financial year.

To assist public sector ordinary schools in supporting students with SEN, the Education Bureau (EDB) provided schools with additional resources, professional support and teacher training on top of regular subvention. The EDB also collaborates with non-governmental organisations to help schools

implement the Whole School Approach to IE.

Our reply to the Hon Lillian Kwok's question is as follows:

(1) The EDB places great emphasis on professional training on special education for teachers, actively enhances teachers' professional knowledge and capabilities, promotes the development of IE, and supports the diverse learning needs of students.

Starting from the 2007/08 school year, the EDB has launched a teacher professional development framework on IE to provide serving teachers with structured training programmes pitched at basic, advanced and thematic levels, commonly known as BAT Courses. From the 2017/18 to 2021/22 school years, the numbers of teachers having completed the basic, advanced and thematic courses are 4 314, 1 405 and 2 135 respectively, totaling about 8 000. It is worth noting that the number of teachers having completed the BAT Courses per year has increased from 1 485 in the 2017/18 school year to 3 331 in the 2021/22 school year, representing an increase of more than one-fold. From this, it can be seen that teachers are currently more enthusiastic in enrolling in the relevant courses than before the epidemic. As we expect that the number of teachers attending the BAT Courses will continue to rise, the EDB will increase the number of training places to meet the demand.

The EDB has been listening to the views of the sector to continually review and enhance the contents and arrangements of in-service teacher training programmes on IE, so as to cater for the needs of schools, teachers and students. Starting from the 2021/22 school year, we have organised a new online Basic Course to enable teachers to take the course more flexibly. We have also increased the number of training places for the BAT Courses so as to allow more teachers to receive the relevant training. In addition, the EDB has offered nine types of Thematic Courses, helping teachers focus on the understanding of different support strategies. We have also incorporated mental health into the Thematic Courses with a view to making the BAT Courses more comprehensive. Moreover, the EDB organises the training programme for new-to-role Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO), and regularly conducts activities to facilitate professional exchanges.

On pre-service teacher training, the EDB collaborated closely with teacher education universities (TEUs) and introduced the Guiding Framework for Teacher Education Programmes in 2023, incorporating the knowledge and skills in supporting students with SEN as core elements of the programmes. When designing the pre-service training programmes, TEUs will cover contents of the Basic Course under the BAT Courses, so that newly-joined teachers can possess qualification of the Basic Course.

(2) IE is based on the spirit of "equal opportunities and teaching students in accordance with their abilities", allowing students with SEN to integrate into mainstream schools. Schools must fully utilise the schools' and other resources and adopt various adaptation and support strategies to cater for the different learning needs of students and help students with different abilities transit to multiple pathways.

Regarding the curriculum, under the principle of "one curriculum framework for all", schools can follow the central curriculum and systematically adapt the learning contents, processes and requirements in accordance with students' abilities, personal interests and learning traits to provide students with SEN with rich and diversified learning experiences. As for the senior secondary level, elective subjects in the curriculum are broad and diversified, including a series of applied learning courses to cater for students' varied interests, needs and abilities, thereby helping unleash their potential and facilitating articulation to multiple pathways.

In order to help students with SEN develop their potential according to their own strengths and interests and explore the suitable study or career pathways, the EDB launched the Strength-based Programme under the Project on Whole School Approach to Providing Tiered Support for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the 2021/22 school year to unleash the potential and strengthen the life planning of senior secondary students with ASD. The 2022 Policy Address has announced the expansion of the project to benefit about 100 secondary schools. Moreover, the EDB develops life planning education through various measures, such as the Business-School Partnership Programme under which diversified career exploration activities are organised for students. Many organisations in the service, retail and hotel industries have arranged activities for students with SEN. In addition, we also organise thematic seminars for teachers to equip them with the knowledge of life planning as well as the guidance skills and pathways for studies and career development of students with SEN.

(3) The EDB has been reviewing the development of IE and introduced a series of enhanced measures to further strengthen the effectiveness of IE in recent years. As regards the support for teachers, the EDB has, starting from the 2019/20 school year, extended the Learning Support Grant to all public sector ordinary schools and substantially increased the grant rates so that schools can flexibly deploy resources, employ additional staff or hire professional services to support teachers. On the manpower front, the EDB provides regular teaching posts of Special Educational Needs Support Teacher and upgrades the rank of SENCO in public sector ordinary schools with a comparatively large number of students with SEN, enabling SENCO to fulfil their leadership and coordination responsibilities more effectively. As regards the professional support, the EDB has further extended the Enhanced School-based Educational Psychology Service and created school-based speech therapist posts to implement the Enhanced School-based Speech Therapy Service. All of the above enhanced measures provide support to teachers and parents and facilitate schools in implementing IE more effectively.

As regards the support for parents, the EDB launched the "SENSE" website to promote the understanding of the development of IE among parents, schools and the public. Through the "Smart Parent Net" website, practical information on supporting children with SEN is also provided for parents, so as to facilitate them to establish good parent-child relationship and nurture children's physical and psychological development.

In sum, the effective implementation of IE relies on the concerted

efforts of all stakeholders. The EDB will continue to strengthen teachers' professional training and support for schools, teachers and parents and work hand in hand with different stakeholders to build a caring and inclusive society.

Thank you, President.

Inspection of aquatic products imported from Japan

In response to the Japanese Government's plan to discharge nuclear-contaminated water at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene issued a Food Safety Order which prohibits all aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds originating from the 10 metropolis/prefectures, namely Tokyo, Fukushima, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Chiba, Gunma, Tochigi, Niigata, Nagano and Saitama, from being imported into and supplied in Hong Kong.

For other Japanese aquatic products, sea salt, and seaweeds that are not prohibited from being imported into Hong Kong, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department will conduct comprehensive radiological tests to verify that the radiation levels of these products do not exceed the guideline levels before they are allowed to be supplied in the market.

As the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water is unprecedented and will continue for 30 years or more, the Government will closely monitor and step up the testing arrangements. Should anomalies be detected, the Government does not preclude further tightening the scope of the import ban.

From noon on October 17 to noon today (October 18), the CFS conducted tests on the radiological levels of 187 food samples imported from Japan, which were of the "aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt" category. No sample was found to have exceeded the safety limit. Details can be found on the CFS's thematic website titled "Control Measures on Foods Imported from Japan" (www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme_rafs/programme_rafs_fc_01_30_Nuclear_Event_and_Food_Safety.html).

In parallel, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has also tested 50 samples of local catch for radiological levels. All the samples passed the tests. Details can be found on the AFCD's website (www.afcd.gov.hk/english/fisheries/Radiological_testing/Radiological_Test.html).

The Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) has also enhanced the environmental monitoring of the local waters. No anomaly has been detected so far. For details, please refer to the HKO's website (www.hko.gov.hk/en/radiation/monitoring/seawater.html).

From August 24 to noon today, the CFS and the AFCD have conducted tests on the radiological levels of 9 235 samples of food imported from Japan (including 6 032 samples of aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt) and 2 706 samples of local catch respectively. All the samples passed the tests.

Effective Exchange Rate Index

The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Wednesday, October 18, 2023 is 106.4 (down 0.2 against yesterday's index).