

漁農自然護理署
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20 December 2013

(Urgent by fax: 2840 0716)

Public Accounts Committee
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Complex,
1 Legislative Council Road
Central, Hong Kong
(Attn: Ms Mary SO)

Dear Ms SO,

Public Account Committee
Consideration of Chapter 5 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 61
Protection of country parks and special areas

I refer to your letter under reference dated 11 December 2013.

I attach herewith bilingual responses of this department to the written questions raised in your letter.

Yours sincerely,

(Joseph SHAM)
for Director of Agriculture, Fisheries & Conservation

Encl.

c.c Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury (fax no. 2147 5239)
Director of Audit (fax no. 2583 9063)

覆函請寄交「漁農自然護理署署長」
Please address all replies to Director of Agriculture, Fisheries & Conservation

Chapter 5 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 61
"Protection of country parks and special areas"

AFCD's response to the written questions
from Public Accounts Committee

Patrolling and law enforcement

Patrolling practices

- (a) ***Whether the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") would put in place practicable target frequencies for patrolling routine foot beats, instead of treating the existing target frequencies for patrolling routine foot beats as a rough guideline for supervisors to plan patrolling duties for frontline staff (paragraph 2.10(a) of the Audit Report refers)?***

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is reviewing the current routine foot beats for all country parks, including the beat length, coverage, check points and target frequency, taking into account the objectives and operational need of the patrol beats under different situations. After the review has been completed, a realistic and achievable "target frequency" for all routine foot beats will be set for supervisors to plan patrolling duties for frontline staff and to keep track on the actual patrol frequency. We will establish a proper record keeping system to monitor the frequency of patrols conducted, and where necessary, adjustments made to the targets as well as the justifications for the adjustments.

- (b) ***What steps would be taken by the AFCD to improve its patrolling practices to address the problems identified in paragraphs 2.12 and 2.16 to 2.18 of the Audit Report, namely, coverage of patrol routes not regularly reviewed, few check points are set for patrol routes, and country park enclaves ("enclaves") not adequately inspected?***

AFCD is reviewing the current routine foot beats for all country parks to ensure that all the important check points will be appropriately covered. In general, the setting of check point for each foot beat is based on a number of criteria. For instance, black spots of irregularities, major recreational facilities, emergency telephone booths, "enclaves" and way-marks will also be considered as check points. District

supervisors will review regularly each foot beat's check points by adding, deleting or adjusting the locations of check points, if necessary. AFCD will monitor closely the effectiveness of the patrolling on new foot beats adopted. In parallel, a new guideline for devising and monitoring the foot beats will be set as soon as practicable for district supervisors' reference.

- (c) *Whether consideration would be given to changing the approach of conducting inspection visits to enclaves, which mainly involved private land, by advising patrol staff not to inspect enclaves only if there are difficulties in entering the enclaves, such as the enclaves are entirely fenced off or the villagers living in the enclaves intend to unleash dogs to attack patrol staff. According to paragraph 2.19(a) of the Audit Report, AFCD staff should avoid trespassing into enclaves as far as possible due to possible legal implications and potential conflicts with the villagers as most enclaves by nature involved private land?*

Enclaves could be inspected either by on-site visits along existing footpaths or from a vantage point nearby in order to spot any irregularities such as large scale excavation, site clearance and tree felling, formation of access road, presence of excavators or bulldozers, etc, occurred at the subject sites. Although trespassing into private land within enclaves should be avoided as far as possible, observations and inspections could still be made at nearby government land or vantage points.

- (d) *Whether the AFCD considers it adequate to take photographs of enclaves at vantage points, to ensure that there are no incompatible developments in the enclaves. According to paragraph 2.19(c) of the Audit Report, although some of the enclaves were not set as check points for inspection, they were inspected along the patrol routes as far as possible and photo records were taken at vantage points without entering into the enclaves?*

Under certain circumstances where inspection of enclaves cannot be made along existing footpaths, observations can be made at vantage points nearby. Where necessary, the observations could be made with the aid of binoculars. Photographs of the enclave would be taken for record purpose and for future reference.

- (e) ***Whether remoteness and low accessibility should be used as the criteria for not conducting routine patrols to enclaves (paragraph 2.24(c) of the Audit Report refers), having regard to the fact that illegal developments, such as erection of columbaria, have been found in remote government land; and what are the objective standards for determining that an enclave is remote and the accessibility is low?***

From a risk-based management perspective, AFCD prioritizes inspection resources to enclaves that are considered under higher risks of unauthorized activities. Enclaves that are remote and low in accessibility are generally considered having relatively lower risks. When an enclave is not accessible through existing roads, footpaths or piers, AFCD would consider it remote with low accessibility. Such enclaves are inspected with a lower frequency. To strengthen the inspection at these remote enclaves, AFCD will consider conducting inspection on a helicopter or a boat and by making use of the aerial photographs provided by the Lands Department.

- (f) ***How were the ad hoc inspections to the 10 enclaves, currently not covered by any routine foot beats, carried out; what was the time interval for conducting such ad hoc inspections; and whether consideration would be given to adopting means, other than patrolling on foot, to protect enclaves against activities which might not be compatible with the natural environment, say, by making use of the aerial photographs of the enclaves taken by the Government Flying Service at different time periods to check if there are changes made to the site condition of the enclaves?***

For the 10 enclaves that are not covered by the existing foot beats, inspections were conducted with a lower frequency. The observations were conducted by on-site visits, at vantage points or from a boat. In 2012, the frequencies of inspection conducted by the AFCD on these enclaves were between one and five times. Such frequencies are constantly under reviewed. To strengthen the inspection at these enclaves, AFCD will review the existing foot beats to cover these enclaves as far as possible. Where necessary, AFCD will conduct inspection on a helicopter or a boat and by making use of the aerial photographs provided by the Lands Department.

- (g) ***What are the reasons for the downtime of the Global Positioning System ("GPS") function of the Personal Data Assistants ("PDAs") (from April to July 2013) provided to patrol staff; and what steps would be taken to minimize the occurrence of such downtime?***

The main reason for the downtime of the GPS function of the PDAs was due to map generation problem of the server which caused no GPS map being shown on web application. Such problem was fixed after the programme in the server was modified in August 2013. To minimize the occurrence of such downtime, the system will be upgraded in the next enhancement exercise to ensure that any malfunction of the server can be detected as early as possible and remedial action can be taken immediately. However, the problem due to poor GPS signal in certain locations in the country parks is an intrinsic limitation of the hardware that cannot be fully resolved.

- (h) ***When was the GPS function of the PDAs provided to patrol staff last updated?***

The GPS function was last updated in August 2013 and will be updated as and when necessary.

Regulation of camping

- (i) ***Whether consideration would be given to increasing the existing provision of 40 designated campsites in country parks; if so, whether consideration would be given to providing/improving camping facilities, such as water and electricity supplies, in the country parks concerned?***

Campsites are designated in country parks for facilitating the public to experience the natural environment in countryside and supporting the long-distance hikers for stopover purposes. Relatively more campsites are provided along long-distance hiking trails such as the MacLehose Trail and Lantau Trail. AFCD has taken into account various factors (such as terrain, accessibility, water supply, scenic value, potential of fire hazard and impact of the camping activity on the natural environment and neighbouring villages) in assessing the suitability of designating campsites in country parks. In general, camping facilities include barbeque pits, cooking stoves, benches and tables, cloth lines,

pavilions, toilets and water source. In some campsites, bathing facilities are provided for the general public. AFCD will continue to frequently review the facilities provided in existing campsites to meet the needs of country park visitors. Furthermore, AFCD will further explore the feasibility of providing new designated campsites in suitable locations in country parks.

Hill fire prevention

- (j) ***What are the reasons for the AFCD to continue adopting manual surveillance of hill fire, despite the fact that some Mainland/overseas cities have adopted automated fire surveillance systems?***

A wildfire detection system using infrared thermal remote sensing technology had been tested in Tai Lam Country Park in 2010. The performance of the system was found limited by such factors as unstable connectivity of mobile telecommunication networks, unstable power supply in the area, and susceptibility to interference from ambient environmental conditions, such as the light sources in the populated area (e.g. village areas) near country parks. Given the limitation, it was considered that the technology was not yet feasible to substitute the manual surveillance of hill fire.

- (k) ***Whether the AFCD had conducted further test on the use of infrared thermal remote sensing technology for surveillance of hill fire after 2010; and whether consideration would be given to testing other automated fire surveillance systems?***

AFCD has not conducted further test on use of infrared thermal sensing technology for surveillance of hill fire after 2010. In view of the possible advancement in technology, AFCD will gather updated information on the development and application of relevant automated hill fire surveillance technology and explore the feasibility of application in Country Parks.

- (l) ***Whether the AFCD would step up measures to minimize fire hazard in country parks, if so, what these measures are?***

According to AFCD's record, the number of hill fire incidents in Country Parks/Special Areas has greatly reduced by 65% from 51 in

2008-09 to 18 in 2012-13. The current measures undertaken by AFCD in suppressing hill fire are considered effective and efficient. AFCD will continue the current practice in hill fire prevention. In response to Audit's recommendation to prohibit smoking in Country Parks/Special Areas to further minimize fire hazards, AFCD will examine the desirability and feasibility of prohibiting smoking or restrict smoking only to designated areas in Country Parks/Special Areas. Tobacco Control Officer of Department of Health would be consulted if necessary.

Regulating incompatible developments

- (m) ***What are the objective criteria in assessing whether the 54 enclaves, which are currently not protected by the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208), should either be (i) incorporated into country parks or (ii) have their proper uses determined through statutory planning (i.e. through the preparation of the Development Permission Area Plans and subsequently the Outline Zoning Plans); and which one of the two aforesaid protective measures or other protective measures is considered more suitable by the Administration for these enclaves in terms of striking a balance between development and nature conservation?***

To determine whether an enclave is suitable for incorporation into a country park or to decide their proper uses through statutory planning, the Government will carry out assessments on the enclaves having regard to their situations. Relevant factors such as conservation values, landscape and aesthetic values, geographical locations, existing scale of human settlement and development pressures are taken into consideration.

- (n) ***What is the expected timeframe for the return of the 18 hectares of land in the Clear Water Bay Country Park to the AFCD; and what is the Administration's plan on the use of the returned land?***

The Environmental Protection Department estimates that the existing South East New Territories (SENT) Landfill will be closed in 2015. Of the 18 hectares of country park land, about 9 hectares of land, which is being used as the SENT Landfill, can be returned to the AFCD after completion of about two years of restoration following the closure of the

landfill. The remaining some 9 hectares of land is located within the proposed landfill extension area and the project is subject to LegCo's approval of the funding application. If the funding application is approved, the landfill extension will operate for about six years. After completion of the operation, the country park area within the extension site can be returned to AFCD following completion of about two years of restoration.

Publicity and educational activities

- (o) ***Whether the AFCD had conducted any study to find out why the Internet hit rate of the education kit for use by secondary schools, launched by the AFCD in October 2010 to help teachers promote nature conservation at schools, had steadily declined; and if so, what the reasons are?***

The education kit for secondary school contains learning and teaching materials such as teaching guides, photographic field guides, maps, worksheets and model answers. With the aid of the kit, teachers can guide their students to prepare for a fruitful visit to country parks and country park visitor centres. All of the aforementioned teaching materials can be downloaded from the web-based education kit. If the teachers have downloaded all the teaching materials, they do not need to re-visit the website. Thus, the decline in hit rate is expected.

To further encourage and facilitate outdoor learning expedition in Country Parks, AFCD has developed a series of school education programmes to be conducted in country park visitor centres. We will also update the worksheets in the education kit according to the education programmes in the country parks visitor centres to facilitate teachers and students to explore the natural wonders in country parks and enjoy their learning experience.