

10 December 2024
Discussion Paper

Legislative Council
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Proposed delineation of quality farmland as Agricultural Priority Areas

Purpose

To promote the overall sustainable development and industrial diversification of the local agriculture industry, the Government proposed to delineate some quality farmland as Agricultural Priority Areas (APAs) through administrative means to achieve the policy objective of putting the relevant land into active agricultural use, and to roll out support measures to facilitate long-term active farming use for APAs. This paper briefs Members on the relevant proposal and the support measures.

Background

2. The Environment and Ecology Bureau (EEB) published the Blueprint for the Sustainable Development of Agriculture and Fisheries in late 2023, setting out a number of measures to promote the upgrading and transformation of local agriculture industry towards modernisation and sustainable development. One of the measures was to delineate APAs to preserve quality farmland and facilitate long-term active farming use, and to engage stakeholders on the recommendations of the consultancy study on APAs.

3. The work on the “Consultancy Study on Agricultural Priority Areas” (Consultancy Study) had commenced earlier, and a steering committee had been set up jointly by EEB and the Development Bureau to oversee the work. In addition to examining the current situation of local farmland, the Consultancy Study also made reference to relevant experiences in the Mainland and overseas.

After excluding the land with specific development plan¹, the Consultancy Study had drawn up specific proposal with regard to the locations and areas of the APAs based on ten selection criteria².

Proposed APAs

4. According to the rolling surveys on farmland conducted by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), as at the end of 2023, there were about 4 000 hectares of land in Hong Kong that had been used or were being used for farming, of which about 730 hectares were active farmland. Based on the aforementioned selection criteria, the Consultancy Study recommended the delineation of 37 APAs, involving around 980 hectares of land in total, of which about 760 hectares are intended for farming uses and about 220 hectares are existing access roads and ancillary agricultural facilities, etc. that are ancillary to farming uses. The proposed APAs are situated in the North District, Yuen Long, Tai Po and the Islands respectively, all of which are areas with ongoing farming activities traditionally. The relevant locations are at Annex. Among the aforementioned 760 hectares of farmland, around 80 hectares are Government land while the other about 680 hectares are private land, which include farmland falling within land use zones such as “Agriculture” zones and “Green Belt” zones, etc. on the outline zoning plans, where agricultural use is always permitted in the aforementioned zones. In other words, the proposed delineation of quality farmland as APAs will not involve any land use rezoning procedures under the town planning mechanism. Relevant details of the 37 APAs have been uploaded to AFCD’s website³.

5. To implement the proposal on APAs, the Government plans to promulgate a “Policy Statement” to set out, through administrative means, its policy objective of delineating APAs to preserve quality farmland for long-term agricultural development and their relevant locations. This serves to inform the public of the Government’s policy to prioritise agriculture use on the relevant land, and provide

¹ The proposed APAs generally do not involve land falling within New Development Areas and will not affect rural development such as New Territories small houses.

² The ten selection criteria are: extensiveness (total farmland area), extant agriculture (area of active farmland), suitable soil, flat topography, road connectivity of farmland, electrical infrastructure, water infrastructure, extent of impact from brownfield sites, ecological value and spatial distribution of farmland.

³ AFCD Website: <<https://www.afcd.gov.hk/apa>>

a guiding direction for the Government and the private sector on the future planning of the relevant land use.

6. Under the existing town planning mechanism, AFCD will consider planning applications for non-agricultural use of privately-owned farmland (including both active and fallow farmland) registered on its record on individual merits, and will normally raise objections to the Town Planning Board (TPB). Upon implementation of the proposal on APAs, AFCD will consider the planning applications for non-agricultural use of private land in APAs on individual merits, taking into account the “Policy Statement” on the delineation of APAs by the Government and from the perspective of ecological conservation, etc., and raise objections to the TPB. The Government will not propose or undertake non-agricultural development on Government land in APAs as a usual practice. As for planning applications for non-agricultural use of farmland outside APAs, objections will normally not be raised by AFCD from agricultural perspective.

Support Measures

7. The Consultancy Study also recommended the implementation of the following support measures to facilitate long-term active farming use for APAs:

- (i) Government Farmland Leasing Scheme: The Government will roll out a “Government Farmland Leasing Scheme” for AFCD to lease suitable Government land in APAs to farmers who are interested in commercial crop production, including farmers affected by land resumption for Government development projects;
- (ii) Dedicated “Farmland Rehabilitation and Matching Scheme”: Regarding private land, AFCD will roll out a dedicated “Farmland Rehabilitation and Matching Scheme” to match farmers interested in renting private land in APAs for agricultural purposes with landowners to facilitate leasing arrangements; and
- (iii) Special Scheme of the Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund: The Government established a \$1 billion Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund. AFCD will roll out a special scheme with the existing resources of the Fund to provide financial and technical support for agricultural activities in APAs, including subsidising the

necessary infrastructure enhancement works (such as irrigation systems and field path access, etc.) for farmland rehabilitation.

Considerations

Sustainable development and industrial diversification of agriculture industry

8. The implementation of APAs by the Government will enhance certainty of its agriculture policy, providing the agricultural sector with greater confidence in making long-term investment to develop modernised farms and apply agrotechnology. This will foster the sustainable development and enhance the productivity and value of the local agriculture industry, as well as boosting diversified economic development in Hong Kong.

Balance between agricultural development and development of private land

9. The delineation of APAs does not impose mandatory restrictions on the use of private land. Even if the private land is located in APAs, landowners may still submit planning applications in accordance with established procedures, and TPB will make a decision after holistic consideration of relevant factors as well as opinions of various Government departments (including AFCD) and the public. Since the landowners are already aware of the Government's "Policy Statement" and positions regarding APAs, it should be able to assist them in making more practical and feasible arrangements, thereby alleviating unnecessary concerns. As for private land outside APAs, landowners may consider converting their farmland for other suitable non-agricultural developments according to their needs, and their applications will be processed under the existing mechanism. While the delineation of APAs does not change the existing planning application approval system, it demonstrates the intention of the Government to prioritise agriculture use on the relevant land and provides guiding direction for long-term development. This arrangement can not only enhance the transparency and predictability of governance, but also strike an appropriate balance between development of private land and agricultural development.

Assistance to farmers affected by Government projects

10. Through support measures such as the “Government Farmland Leasing Scheme” and the dedicated “Farmland Rehabilitation and Matching Scheme”, etc., AFCD will provide assistance as far as practicable to farmers affected by land resumption arising from Government development projects and strategically guide them to continue to operate in APAs that are preserved for a long term. In the long run, these support measures will help to optimise the utilisation of farmland resources, improve environment in rural areas and conserve natural ecology, and will be conducive to the sustainable development of the agriculture industry and bring benefits to the balanced development of the society as a whole.

Promotion of Urban Farming

11. In addition to preserving quality farmland for active farming use through the delineation of APAs, we will also seize the opportunities presented by the development of the Northern Metropolis and other New Development Areas (NDAs) to promote urban farming, so as to allow farming activities to be conducted in different approaches in accordance with the policy of promoting sustainable development of agriculture, and facilitate the integrated development of commercial agriculture and urban areas. Among which, TPB has earlier revised the Definition of Term used in statutory plan for “Open Space” to include “urban farm”, so as to allow the setting up of urban farms to be operated on a commercial basis in “Open Space” areas (such as parks and outdoor public open space in urban areas and NDAs), with the aim of better integrating agricultural development with urban live. In the meantime, we will consider introducing urban farming elements into the planning stage of NDAs, making good use of urban spaces in the Northern Metropolis and other NDAs (such as areas already designated as parks / public spaces) for relevant use, with a view to developing urban farming through a multi-pronged approach.

12. Apart from the aforementioned outdoor spaces, the Government will also identify suitable rooftops of Government buildings and public markets, including the Tin Shui Wai Public Market under construction and the Kwu Tung North Public Market for which construction funding has been allocated, to set up modernised hydroponic farms-cum-stalls for operation by the trade upon application, with a view to promoting the concept of “harvest-to-sale”.

13. Besides, to encourage business enterprises to integrate urban farming elements when planning commercial development projects, AFCD has been actively engaging with the “Hong Kong Green Building Council” and “BEAM Society” to explore setting urban farming as one of the indicators of green buildings, such as incorporating into the assessment scheme of the Building Environment Assessment Method Plus, with the aim of blending farming into urban life while strengthening Hong Kong’s development and standards of sustainable architecture.

Way Forward

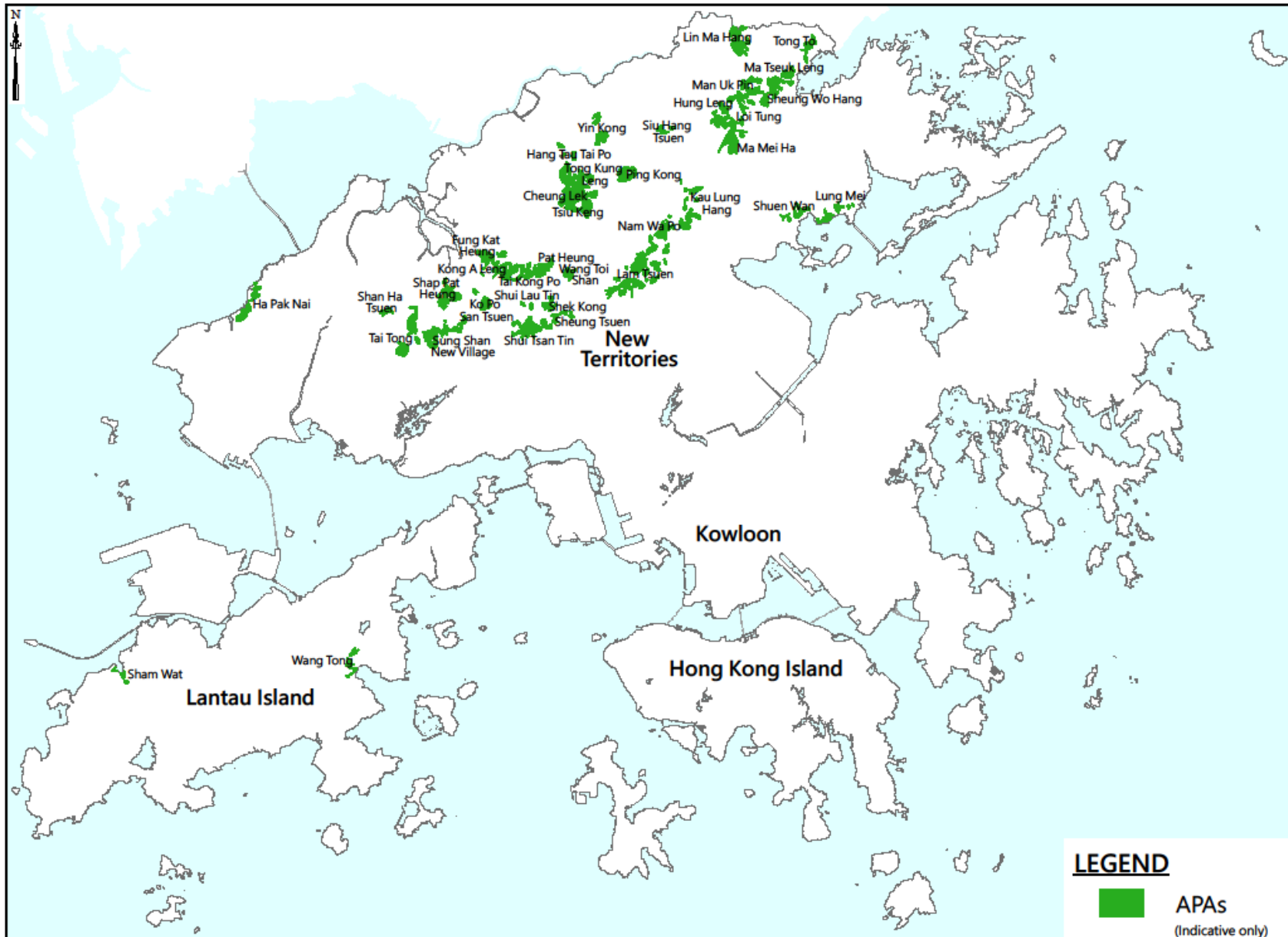
14. The Government will progressively brief relevant stakeholders (including the agricultural sector, relevant district councils, Heung Yee Kuk, TPB and green groups, etc.) on the proposal and support measures for APAs starting from early next year for early implementation of the APA policy.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to express their views on the above recommendations.

Environment and Ecology Bureau
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
December 2024

Locations of 37 Proposed APAs



| APA | No. |
|----------------|-----------|
| North District | 15 |
| Yuen Long | 15 |
| Tai Po | 5 |
| Islands | 2 |
| Total | 37 |