

Grave sweepers urged to prevent hill fires

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) today (March 29) reminded people paying respects to their ancestors at graveyards in the countryside during the Ching Ming Festival period to exercise caution and prevent hill fires.

An AFCD spokesman said it is an offence under the Forests and Countryside Ordinance (Cap. 96) to burn incense improperly or leave behind kindling in the countryside. Any person who contravenes the ordinance is liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and one year's imprisonment.

"The AFCD will deploy staff and enforcement officers to patrol graveyards in the countryside during the Ching Ming Festival period. Those found breaching the law will be prosecuted. Three people were prosecuted by the AFCD for the illegal lighting of fires in different locations last year," the spokesman said.

The majority of hill fires in the territory are caused by human negligence. Accidents can be prevented if grave sweepers observe some simple guidelines:

- * Remove weeds around the graves with tools and never burn weeds;
- * Burning should only be done inside a container or iron bucket;
- * Never leave burning incense unattended; and
- * Make sure all kindling is put out before leaving.

The spokesman said that metal containers for burning offerings properly will be handed out to grave sweepers at suitable locations in the country parks during the Ching Ming Festival, adding that barbecues should only be carried out at designated sites in the country parks.

The AFCD will deploy additional country park wardens to step up the fire prevention efforts. They will patrol hill fire black spots and distribute hill fire prevention leaflets together with the Fire Services Department, the Police and the Civil Aid Service. Volunteer teams from the Hong Kong Hiking Association, China, and the Scout Association of Hong Kong will visit grave sweeping areas and hiking trails to disseminate hill fire prevention messages to the public.

Members of the public are reminded to keep the countryside clean. Before leaving, grave sweepers and barbecue site users should not leave behind their offerings or rubbish. The AFCD issued fixed penalty notices to 164 persons for littering in the country parks last year.