

Offenders in three cases of illegal asbestos removal fined

A contractor and a person-in-charge of works as well as two residential unit owners were respectively convicted at Eastern Magistrates' Courts today (June 1) and at Kwun Tong Magistrates' Courts on May 21 of contravening the Air Pollution Control Ordinance (APCO) by illegally demolishing asbestos-containing materials. They were fined a total of \$27,000.

A spokesman for the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) said that the department conducted proactive inspections as well as followed up on reports from members of the public in August and November last year. During the operations, the EPD found the illegal demolition of corrugated asbestos cement sheet roofing at premises at Kowloon Tong Court in Kowloon Tong, at Wah Fat Building in Kwun Tong and at Tai Kut House in Quarry Bay. After collecting evidence, the EPD confirmed that, in the above-mentioned cases, no written notice was given to the EPD at least 28 days in advance of the commencement of the relevant works in accordance with the law. In one of the cases, no registered asbestos contractor (RAC) was hired to carry out the relevant works. The EPD then, under the APCO, initiated prosecutions against the works contractor, namely Stone Engineering Company Limited, the person-in-charge and the residential unit owners involved in the cases.

The spokesman reminded persons-in-charge or contractors of works and property owners that the EPD would follow up seriously on every suspected case of illegal removal of asbestos-containing materials. Renovations and refurbishments at buildings involving the demolition of asbestos-containing materials must be carried out by RACs in accordance with the law and the requirements of the code of practice on asbestos control to avoid the release of asbestos fibres and to protect the health of members of the public and workers. Offenders may be liable to a maximum fine of \$200,000 and six months' imprisonment. Meanwhile, contractors who carry out works involving the demolition of asbestos must give not less than 28 days' written notice to the EPD prior to the commencement of such works. Otherwise, they may be liable to a maximum fine of \$200,000.

Members of the public can help combat illegal activities and safeguard public health by calling the EPD departmental hotline at 2838 3111 to make a report if they witness any illegal works involving asbestos.

Provisional statistics of retail sales

for April 2020

The Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) released the latest figures on retail sales today (June 1).

The value of total retail sales in April 2020, provisionally estimated at \$24.1 billion, decreased by 36.1% compared with the same month in 2019. The revised estimate of the value of total retail sales in March 2020 decreased by 42.1% compared with a year earlier. For the first four months of 2020 taken together, it was provisionally estimated that the value of total retail sales decreased by 35.3% compared with the same period in 2019.

After netting out the effect of price changes over the same period, the provisional estimate of the volume of total retail sales in April 2020 decreased by 37.5% compared with a year earlier. The revised estimate of the volume of total retail sales in March 2020 decreased by 44.0% compared with a year earlier. For the first four months of 2020 taken together, the provisional estimate of the total retail sales decreased by 37.1% in volume compared with the same period in 2019.

Analysed by broad type of retail outlet in descending order of the provisional estimate of the value of sales and comparing April 2020 with April 2019, the value of sales of commodities in department stores decreased by 18.0%. This was followed by sales of food, alcoholic drinks and tobacco (-14.0% in value); other consumer goods, not elsewhere classified (-28.6%); electrical goods and other consumer durable goods, not elsewhere classified (-21.7%); wearing apparel (-63.6%); medicines and cosmetics (-62.9%); jewellery, watches and clocks, and valuable gifts (-76.6%); motor vehicles and parts (-19.2%); fuels (-14.1%); books, newspapers, stationery and gifts (-39.9%); footwear, allied products and other clothing accessories (-55.6%); Chinese drugs and herbs (-35.3%); and optical shops (-43.2%).

On the other hand, the value of sales of commodities in supermarkets increased by 14.4% in April 2020 over a year earlier. This was followed by sales of furniture and fixtures (+1.6% in value).

Based on the seasonally adjusted series, the provisional estimate of the value of total retail sales decreased by 25.2% in the three months ending April 2020 compared with the preceding three-month period, while the provisional estimate of the volume of total retail sales decreased by 26.2%.

These retail sales statistics measure the sales receipts in respect of goods sold by local retail establishments and are primarily intended for gauging the short-term business performance of the local retail sector. Data on retail sales are collected from local retail establishments through the Monthly Survey of Retail Sales (MRS). Local retail establishments with and without physical shops are covered in MRS and their sales, both through conventional shops and online channels, are included in the retail sales statistics.

The retail sales statistics cover consumer spending on goods but not on services (such as those on housing, catering, medical care and health services, transport and communication, financial services, education and entertainment) which account for over 50% of the overall consumer spending. Moreover, they include spending on goods in Hong Kong by visitors but exclude spending outside Hong Kong by Hong Kong residents. Hence they should not be regarded as indicators for measuring overall consumer spending.

Users interested in the trend of overall consumer spending should refer to the data series of private consumption expenditure (PCE), which is a major component of the Gross Domestic Product published at quarterly intervals. Compiled from a wide range of data sources, PCE covers consumer spending on both goods (including goods purchased from all channels) and services by Hong Kong residents whether locally or abroad. Please refer to the C&SD publication "Gross Domestic Product (Quarterly)" for more details.

Commentary

A government spokesman said that the year-on-year decline in retail sales remained huge in April, though narrower than that in March, reflecting the still-severe disruptions of COVID-19 and the necessary anti-epidemic measures to consumption- and tourism-related activities.

The spokesman further pointed out that while the epidemic has abated in Hong Kong, the business environment for retail trade remains challenging, as COVID-19 has brought inbound tourism to a standstill, and as austere labour market conditions and various uncertainties continue to weigh on consumption sentiment. The Government will monitor the developments closely.

Further information

Table 1 presents the revised figures on value index and value of retail sales for all retail outlets and by broad type of retail outlet for March 2020 as well as the provisional figures for April 2020. The provisional figures on the value of retail sales for all retail outlets and by broad type of retail outlet as well as the corresponding year-on-year changes for the first four months of 2020 taken together are also shown.

Table 2 presents the revised figures on volume index of retail sales for all retail outlets and by broad type of retail outlet for March 2020 as well as the provisional figures for April 2020. The provisional figures on year-on-year changes for the first four months of 2020 taken together are also shown.

Table 3 shows the movements of the value and volume of total retail sales in terms of the year-on-year rate of change for a month compared with the same month in the preceding year based on the original series, and in terms of the rate of change for a three-month period compared with the preceding three-month period based on the seasonally adjusted series.

The classification of retail establishments follows the Hong Kong

Standard Industrial Classification Version 2.0, which is used in various economic surveys for classifying economic units into different industry classes.

More detailed statistics are given in the "Report on Monthly Survey of Retail Sales". Users can download this publication free of charge at the website of the C&SD

(www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp320.jsp?productCode=B1080003).

Alternatively, the historical series of retail sales statistics can be downloaded in the form of a statistical table at the website of the C&SD

(www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp320.jsp?productCode=D5600089).

Users who have enquiries about the survey results may contact the Distribution Services Statistics Section of the C&SD (Tel: 3903 7400; email: mrs@censtatd.gov.hk).

Government provides updates on implementation of eMPF Platform and outlines related legislative proposals

The Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau issued an Information Paper for the meeting of the Legislative Council's Panel on Financial Affairs today (June 1), providing updates on the implementation of the eMPF Platform and setting out key features of the related legislative proposals.

A spokesman for the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau said, "Following the closure of the Request of Proposal for the eMPF Platform on April 29, 2020, the Government and the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority (MPFA) have been working at full steam with a view to awarding the tender in the second half of the year."

The legislative proposals are to pave the way for the launch and smooth operation of the eMPF Platform. The Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Ordinance (Cap. 485) and its related subsidiary legislation will be amended to reflect the changes in the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) scheme administration workflow after standardisation, streamlining and automation. Specifically, a proper legal basis will be provided for the designation of the eMPF Platform as the gateway for specified MPF scheme administrative procedures. It is also necessary to delineate the roles, functions, powers, responsibilities and interface of the Government, the MPFA, the new eMPF Platform Entity (a wholly owned subsidiary to be formed by the MPFA), trustees and other stakeholders under the operation of the eMPF Platform.

It remains the Government's target to complete the development of the eMPF Platform by 2022 at the earliest, and the on-boarding to the eMPF Platform by all trustees in phases within the subsequent two to three years.

The paper has been uploaded to the website of the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau (www.fstb.gov.hk/fsb/ppr/consult/doc/consult_fap_empf_e.pdf). The public is welcome to send comments on the legislative proposals on or before July 31, 2020, by mail to the bureau at 24/F, Central Government Offices, 2 Tim Mei Avenue, Tamar, Hong Kong; by email to enq@fstb.gov.hk; or by fax to 2529 1663.

Professional Services Advancement Support Scheme invites new round of applications

The Professional Services Advancement Support Scheme (PASS) is inviting a new round of applications starting today (June 1) from non-profit-distributing organisations such as professional bodies, trade and industrial organisations and research institutes.

The PASS, with a total allocation of \$200 million, aims at funding non-profit-making industry-led projects to increase exchanges and co-operation between Hong Kong's professional services and external counterparts, promote relevant publicity activities, and enhance the standards and external competitiveness of Hong Kong's professional services.

The maximum grant under the PASS for each approved project is \$3 million or 90 per cent of the total eligible project cost, whichever is lower. A wide range of professional services such as accounting, legal and dispute resolution, architecture, engineering, healthcare, information and communications technology, design and technical testing and analysis are eligible for the PASS. Sector-specific projects and cross-sectoral projects are both welcome. Expenses directly incurred for implementing a project such as manpower costs, venue and set-up costs, production and promotion costs, and the project team's travel and accommodation costs outside Hong Kong are typically eligible for funding support under the Scheme. Since December 2019, funding support has been extended to cover travel and accommodation costs incurred in PASS-funded events outside Hong Kong either by participants with active roles (e.g. speakers and panellists) or participants taking part in relatively longer PASS-funded professional internship or attachment programmes.

Up to the end of May 2020, 60 different projects have been funded under

the PASS, including activities in and outside Hong Kong. The activities include capacity-building programmes for enhancing the standards of local professionals, such as training programmes, workshops and study tours; outreach and promotional activities for showcasing the strengths of Hong Kong's professional services, such as roadshows, promotional seminars and participation in exhibitions outside Hong Kong; exchange activities for deepening interaction between Hong Kong professionals and their external counterparts, such as visits to other economies, and international conferences and seminars held in Hong Kong; and research projects on potential external markets for Hong Kong professional services and development of best-practice guidelines and manuals for professionals. Details about the PASS and its funded projects are available at www.pass.gov.hk/en/home/index.html.

The PASS receives applications all year round and they are processed on a quarterly basis. The deadline for the new round of applications is August 31, 2020.

A briefing session will be held in July 2020 for organisations interested in applying for PASS funding. Details of the briefing will be uploaded onto the PASS website in due course. For registration for the briefing session or other enquiries, please contact the PASS Secretariat at 3655 5418 or pass@cedb.gov.hk.

[Effective Exchange Rate Index](#)

The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Monday, June 1, 2020 is 108.5 (down 0.2 against last Saturday's index).

â€‹The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Saturday, May 30, 2020 was 108.7 (down 0.2 against last Friday's index).