



Your Ship Don't Stink

Polluting ships are the lesser-known, least-tackled source of our bad air, writes **Winnie Yeung**

Whenever there is a bad air day (most days of the year), we point the blame at cars on the road and factories in the Pearl River Delta. But what about the thousands of boats passing through our waters everyday?

Even though Hong Kong has (admittedly, weak) fuel standard laws for road vehicles, there is only one weak law preventing ships from emitting pollutants.

But those days could be gone soon, if the Marine Department receives some much-delayed legislation at the end of the year that would finally endorse the international standard adopted by most other countries, including China.

According to the latest report by local think-tank Civic Exchange, out of the 325 “bad air days” we have a year, 120 days – or 37 percent – are mainly caused by local vehicles or ships emitting sulfur dioxide.

Sure, not enough has been done about the emissions from cars, but the government has been actively working to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions from road vehicles, including introducing an ultra-low sulfur diesel. Meanwhile out at sea, many ships are cutting costs by using the lowest level of refined fuels (which are cheaper and higher in sulfur). The Civic Exchange report also found Kwai Chung – where most of Hong Kong’s container terminals are – constantly has a higher air pollution reading than other parts of the city.

Right now, the Marine Department oversees emissions from ships by enforcing the Shipping and Port Control Ordinance, which states that a ship will be slapped with a maximum penalty of \$10,000 for the first offence when its smoke is “in such quantity as to be a nuisance” or “affecting the safety of life.”

However, according to the Marine Department, there have been only eight prosecutions over emissions – one in 2005 and seven in 2006.

That number seems low when you consider there were 230,960 ships entering Hong Kong waters last year. River vessels coming from the mainland often use dirtier fuels, sometimes containing eight percent sulfur. And although Hong Kong only sells cleaner fuels with sulfur content as low as 0.5 percent and under, many local vessels prefer travelling to China for higher-sulfur fuels that are half the price of local fuel.

It’s apparent that the current law tackling air pollution on sea is not working as well as it should. But as of now, the Marine Department will take no action unless a complaint is lodged.

The truth is there is a stronger international law out there that Hong Kong does not yet follow. In 2005, most of the world endorsed the Regulations for the Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships, which contains an addendum called Annex VI, setting a cap of 4.5 percent by mass on the sulfur content of fuel oil.

Hong Kong has not done anything about this yet while most European countries and Japan have adopted it. Even China announced

last June that they have ratified the Annex (although their enforcement is questionable).

Finally, in December of last year the government submitted a timetable to Legco that said the legislation based on Annex VI would be gazetted in the first half of 2007, or by the end of this month. It would grant the Marine Department the authority to inspect large ships and require the use of better quality fuel.

But a Marine Department spokeswoman told *HK* that the legislation would not be ready until the end of the year. “I don’t think it’s quite ready yet,” she says, adding that pushing the date to as late as December is not a delay at all. “There hasn’t really been a timetable set for [June],” she says.

The lax attitude of the government is also shown in the Environmental Protection Department, with a spokesperson reportedly saying that marine vessel pollution is “relatively insignificant” and “only” accounts for six percent of all air pollution in the city.

And so unless this legislation is enacted by the end of December – provided the government sticks to this new timetable – we will still have to tolerate ships using high-sulfur fuels coming into our port everyday. What you can do is get those duty officers at the Marine Department to regularly check on polluting vessels by reporting any black smoke you see. ■

What to do

If you see black smoke emitting from a ship,...

- Call 2385-2791 or 2385-2792 during office hours to report it to the Marine Department
- Call the government hotline on 1823. State clearly that you are reporting a polluting vessel to the Marine Department.
- Or visit to Environmental Protection Department’s website (https://epic.epd.gov.hk/ca/uid/complain_submit) to report a vessel or call them at 2838-3111.
- State the date, time and location of the vessel.
- Make good use of your camera phone – take pictures or even videos of the polluting ships.

