

## **Environment and Conservation Fund**

### **Applications under Nature Conservation Management Agreement Scheme**

#### **Purpose**

This paper seeks Members' views on the evaluation of the applications received under the Nature Conservation Management Agreement (MA) Scheme in August 2018.

#### **Background**

2. Under the MA Scheme, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may apply for funding from the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF) for entering into management agreements with the landowners or tenants in order to enhance conservation of the priority sites identified for enhanced conservation under the New Nature Conservation Policy, country park enclaves or private land in country parks.

3. The Guide to Application for MA projects (latest version issued in July 2018) specifies that all applications received will first be evaluated by an Assessment Panel consisting of members from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and the Environmental Protection Department (EPD). The recommendations will then be submitted to the Nature Conservation Subcommittee (NCSC) under the Advisory Council on the Environment (ACE) for consultation and then the ECF Committee for endorsement.

4. This year, the invitation for MA applications was open from 3 July to 13 August 2018. A total of five applications were received for renewal of existing MA projects in respectively the Ramsar Site Priority Site, Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site Priority Site, Long Valley and Ho Sheung Heung Priority Site, Fung Yuen Priority Site, and Lai Chi Wo Enclave. The key features of the applications are summarised in **Annex A**, and the respective applications with supplementary information are provided in **Annexes B to F**.

5. The Assessment Panel meeting was held on 21 September 2018 to evaluate the five applications. The results of the Panel's assessment are summarised in the following paragraphs, and detailed in **Annexes G-1 to G-5**.

*Two Fishpond Management Agreement Projects in Deep Bay*

6. The Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS) has been conducting two MA projects in the Deep Bay since 2012 to enhance the ecological value of fishponds through collaboration with the fishpond operators, with support of the Hong Kong New Territories Fish Culture Association. These two complementary MA projects, covering the Ramsar Site Priority Site and Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site Priority Site, have jointly enhanced the ecological functions of fishponds through wise use of the wetland, preserved traditional fish farming as local cultural heritage, and increased the awareness on aquaculture and bird conservation in the Deep Bay area.

7. Over 90% of the eligible fishponds<sup>1</sup> in the area have been engaged in the fishpond MA projects through the years. In 2017-18, drain-down was conducted at 87% of the engaged fishponds. The high participation rate of local fishpond operators over the large wetland area was a key to success of the projects. Overall, the management measures have provided more feeding opportunities for waterbirds in the Deep Bay area. Monitoring data from 2012 to 2017 have indicated that the mean abundance of waterbirds has increased 20-fold during drain-down as compared to that beforehand, with the most significant increase found in ardeids (egrets and herons) and shorebirds. In addition, ecological surveys conducted in the project sites by HKBWS from March 2013 to February 2017 have recorded a rich diversity of species consisting of 207 bird species, 29 amphibian and reptile species and 35 dragonfly species. HKBWS has also conducted a wide range of public education programmes to raise awareness about the conservation of fishponds. The projects represent a win-win solution to bird conservation and local aquaculture while promoting the wise use of the wetlands.

*Fishpond Conservation Scheme in Ramsar Site 2019-21*

*[Project duration: 1 March 2019 to 28 February 2021 (24 months)]*

8. The current two-year MA project covering the Ramsar Site will end on 28 February 2019. HKBWS has submitted an application to seek ECF's support to continue the project for another two years (**Annex B**). The application requests a funding support of \$7,456,636. Drain-down is proposed to be conducted at up to 95% (i.e. 275 ha) of all eligible fishponds in the area. According to HKBWS'

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<sup>1</sup> Eligible fishponds refer to fishponds with operators registered under the Voluntary Registration Scheme of the AFCD, and located within the Priority Sites.

proposal, apart from conservation management to be conducted by the fishpond operators (i.e. annual drain-down of fishponds), HKBWS will continue to conduct bird surveys to monitor bird usage on fishpond habitats in Deep Bay. A series of public education activities such as eco-tours for schools, talks, exhibitions, secondary school project-learning programme and teacher workshops will be organised. Fishpond education for primary schools will be introduced as a new initiative to highlight the links among fishpond conservation, choice of food and eating habits. The annual Fishpond Festival will continue to be held as an anchor event to promote local aquaculture as well as the ecological and cultural value of Deep Bay fishponds. The applicant would continue organising the Fishpond Sustainable Art Festival, with artwork creation, workshops and exhibitions in the fishpond environment, to showcase the value of fishponds from an artistic perspective.

*Hong Kong Got Fishpond – Eco-fishpond Management Agreement Scheme 2019-2021*

*[Project duration: 1 March 2019 to 28 February 2021 (24 months)]*

9. This project is conducted in the Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site Priority Site by HKBWS, similar to the complementary MA project conducted in the Ramsar Site Priority Site. The current MA project will end on 28 February 2019. HKBWS has submitted a funding application with a view to seeking ECF's support to continue the project for another two years (**Annex C**). The application requests a funding support of \$7,246,276. Drain-down will be conducted at up to 95% (350 ha) of all eligible fishponds in the area. In addition to conservation work such as drain-down and ecological monitoring, HKBWS will organise an array of activities including eco-tours, summer exploration tours, eco-tour guide training, summer camps, workshops, education kiosk and volunteer scheme for enhancing project sustainability and engaging the public. In addition, HKBWS will organise a new "Get-into Community" programme through collaboration with local communities in Tin Shui Wai, Yuen Long and the North District to promote local aquaculture produce which is ecologically friendly. Activities such as eco-tours, community eco-mapping, bird survey, talks, etc. will be organised under the programme to strengthen the linkage between local aquaculture and the community.

10. In general, the Assessment Panel considered that the two complementary fishpond applications worthy of support, in view of the benefits that the proposed projects would bring to the conservation of waterbirds, and in raising public awareness about nature conservation. The track record of the applicant in managing

the previous MA projects was also considered satisfactory. Marks given to the applications on individual criterion and specific considerations are detailed in **Annexes G-1 and G-2** respectively. The Assessment Panel considered the clarifications given by the applicant about the proposed project and budget items satisfactory, and recommended the ECF to grant the revised budgets in full, as summarised in **Annexes H-1 and H-2** for the ECF Committee's endorsement.

***Nature and Human in Harmony - Nature Conservation Management for Long Valley 2019-2021***

*[Project duration: 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2021 (24 months)]*

11. The Conservancy Association (CA) (in association with HKBWS) has been conducting MA projects in Long Valley and Ho Sheung Heung Priority Site since 2005. Previous MA projects at Long Valley have successfully enhanced the biodiversity and ecological values of the freshwater wetlands in the area. The number of bird species has increased from 221 before the MA (2005) to 314 at present, which accounts for about 57% of the total number of bird species in Hong Kong. Abundances of target species such as the critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting and the Chinese Bullfrog (Class II Protected in China) have also increased. Over 240 000 participants and visitors were involved in the various public education and publicity programmes, accompanied with wide media coverage for the previous project which was completed in 2017. The current project (2017-2019) is also in good progress, with 28 farmers, representing two-thirds of the local farming community, engaged to manage over 17 ha of land. All in all, the project has been successful in partnering with local stakeholders in enhancing nature conservation, and has become a showcase for MA projects.

12. As the current project will end on 31 August 2019, CA has submitted a funding application to seek ECF's support to continue the project (**Annex D**). The new application requests funding support of \$9,102,960.76 for management of about 19.7 ha of land. Similar to the previous phases of the MA project, active management of different habitat types, including shallow water habitats, paddy rice fields and freshwater marshes, as well as biodiversity surveys and conservation measures, will be implemented. Education activities including eco-tours, harvest festivals, volunteer programmes and exhibitions will also continue to be organised. In anticipation of the resumption of Long Valley under the North East New Territories New Development Areas (NENT NDAs) project, the project team proposed management of the portion of the site within Long Valley (to be resumed under the

NENT NDAs project) for 12 months, and the portion at Ho Sheung Heung for 24 months.

13. In general, the Assessment Panel considered the application worth supporting, in view of the benefits that the proposed project would bring to the conservation of wetland habitats and wildlife, and in raising public awareness about nature conservation. The track record of the applicant in managing the previous MA projects was also considered satisfactory. Marks given to the application on individual criterion and specific considerations are detailed in **Annex G-3**. However, the Assessment Panel was mindful of the uncertainty in the schedule of the land resumption under the NENT NDAs project. For sake of prudence, it recommended the ECF to grant funding for 12-month operations only (i.e. from 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020) so as to allow for more flexibility to adjust to future developments in the land resumption process. The Assessment Panel's recommended revision to the proposed budget for the shortened project duration (a reduction of about 38.9%) and the funding conditions on the application in relation to the arrangements under the land resumption process are set out in **Annex H-3** for consideration by ECF Committee.

*Management Agreement Scheme at Lai Chi Wo Enclave 2019-2021*  
*[Project duration: 1 October 2019 to 30 September 2021 (24 months)]*

14. In association with CA, Hong Kong Countryside Foundation (HKCF) has received funding to initiate the first MA project at Lai Chi Wo in October 2017. The project is in good progress, with eco-agriculture activities and various habitat management measures being implemented by different stakeholder groups.

15. The current MA project will end on 30 September 2019. HKCF has submitted a funding application to seek ECF's support to continue the project for another two years. The new application requests a funding support of \$8,166,184 for management of about 5.0 ha of land (**Annex E**). The project will continue to strengthen its four pillars of work, namely biodiversity conservation, eco-friendly agriculture, community engagement and public education. Similar to the current project (2017-2019), habitats including wetlands, wet and dry agricultural fields, stream, terraced fields and orchard will be managed to provide suitable habitats for aquatic plants and wildlife such as amphibians, dragonflies, butterflies and freshwater fish (in particular, rice fish). HKCF will conduct ecological surveys to monitor the target taxa groups and carry out community engagement activities to build up the

capacity of the local community. HKCF will also organise a wide range of education activities including eco-tours, workshops, Harvest Fun Fairs, etc. for the public.

16. Overall, the Assessment Panel considered the project worthy of support in view of the benefits the project would bring to the enhancement of the conservation value of Lai Chi Wo. More importantly, the project would help revitalise the traditional farming landscape at Lai Chi Wo through engaging and collaborating with local villagers; the project would also help raise awareness on rural sustainability. Marks given to the application on individual criterion and specific considerations are detailed in **Annex G-4**. The Assessment Panel recommended minor revision to the proposed budget (a reduction of about 0.33%) in order to comply with the Guide to Application after considering the clarifications on the manpower and insurance provided by the applicant upon request. These minor amendments are detailed in **Annex H-4** for the ECF Committee's endorsement.

***Management Agreement on the Private Land with High Conservation Value at Fung Yuen Valley Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in Tai Po, Hong Kong (2019-2021)***

*[Project duration: 1 February 2019 to 31 July 2021 (30 months)]*

17. The Environmental Association (EA) Limited has conducted MA projects in the Fung Yuen Priority Site since 2005. Through implementing conservation management measures to maintain and enhance the habitat quality of this important site for butterflies, the number of butterfly species recorded at Fung Yuen has increased from 162 in 2005 (i.e. beginning of the first MA project) to 216 at present, which accounts for over 80% of the butterfly species in Hong Kong. Public education and engagement activities including workshops, exhibitions, volunteer programmes and butterfly festivals have also been organised during previous MA projects.

18. The current three-year MA project will end on 31 January 2019, and EA has submitted a funding application to seek ECF's support of \$9,044,028 to continue the project for another 2.5 years (**Annex F**). Under the proposed project, about 2.1 ha of land will be actively managed through site stewardship, planting of butterfly larval food and nectar plants, conducting monitoring and surveys, as well as removal of invasive weeds. Education programmes including various volunteer programmes and workshops on nature conservation, monthly and annual butterfly festivals for the general public, as well as outreach booths for schools, will be carried out.

19. In general, the Assessment Panel considered the application worth supporting, in view of the benefits that the proposed project would bring to the conservation of butterflies and in raising public awareness on nature conservation, and the track record of the applicant in managing the previous MA projects. The Assessment Panel's comments on individual criterion and specific considerations are detailed in **Annex G-5**. A budget item was found incompliant with the Guide to Application and thus a revised proposed budget (a reduction of about 0.33%) is recommended to the ECF Committee for consideration (**Annex H-5**).

### **Recommendations from the NCSC**

20. At the meeting on 19 October 2018, the NCSC was consulted on the five MA applications together with the evaluation by the Assessment Panel. Members in general supported the Assessment Panel's recommendations and recommended submitting the applications to the ECF Committee for endorsement.

### **Advice Sought**

21. Members are invited to consider the recommendations of the Assessment Panel and the NCSC, and advise whether the MA applications should be approved and, if so, the exact amount of funds to be granted.

**Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department**  
**Environmental Protection Department**  
**November 2018**