

**Minutes of the Fourth Meeting of the Environment and
Conservation Fund Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee
held on 27 September 2013 at 3:30 p.m.
in Room 502, 5/F., Southorn Centre, Wanchai**

Present

Mr Kenneth CHAN	(Chairman)
Mr Barry MC KWONG	
Miss Jane HUI	
Mr Luther LT WONG	
Mr Victor KWONG	
Mr Victor C LI	
Prof Irene LO	
Prof Kenneth MY LEUNG	
Dr Arthur PS LAU	
Dr Daniel TSANG	
Mr Patrick LIU	(ENB / EPD)
Dr YIP Yin	(AFCD)
Ms Anita SW TSUI	Secretary (EPD)
Ms Sharon TSAI	Assistant Secretary (EPD)

Absent with Apologies

Mr Conrad PK LAM
Mr LAM Chiu-ying
Dr SHUM Ho-cheung,
Anderson

Welcoming Remarks

The Chairman welcomed all Members attending the meeting of the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF) Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee (RPVSC).

Agenda Item 1: Confirmation of Minutes of the Previous Meeting

2. Draft minutes of the previous meeting were circulated to Members on 1 August 2013. Suggested amendments received from Members were

subsequently incorporated and the amended minutes were further circulated on 5 August 2013. As no further comment was raised by Members, the minutes as amended were confirmed.

Agenda Item 2: Matters Arising from Minutes of the Previous Meeting

3. Ms Sharon TSAI said that at the RPVSC meeting held on 21 June 2013, Members examined the funding application for the conference project "International symposium on zero-carbon buildings and IEA ECBCS annex 58 working meeting" (Project ECF 17/2012). After deliberation, the meeting invited the PI to consider various suggestions of Members on the project, and to submit the revised project proposal for RPVSC's further consideration. Ms Sharon TSAI reported that the Secretariat received the PI's notification on 15 July 2013 about her decision to withdraw the application. The PI indicated that she did not have enough time to prepare for the international symposium under the project, and hence would focus only on the IEA ECBCS Annex 58 working meeting. For this reason, she no longer required ECF's funding support.

Agenda Item 3: Review on the Applications Assessment Mechanism of the Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee *[RPVSC Paper 16/2013-2014]*

4. Ms Sharon TSAI reported that as a long-term commitment to environmental protection and conservation, the Chief Executive proposed in his 2013 Policy Address to inject \$5,000 million into the ECF so that investment returns of the fund can provide long-term and sustained support for community green actions. The proposed capital injection was approved by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council on 14 June 2013. The ECF Committee met on 4 September 2013 to consider the budget allocations in 2013-14 as well as the revised framework for assessing funding applications to tie in with the new budgetary management approach. After review, the ECF Committee agreed to reserve, inter alia, an allocation of \$14 million for use by Environmental Research, Technology Demonstration and Conference (RTDC) projects under the purview of the Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee (RPVSC). The allocation had taken into account the actual expenditure of the

RTDC funding scheme in recent years, as well as its anticipated level of activities in the coming year. The ECF Committee would further decide on the 2014-15 budget allocation for the various funding schemes in March 2014, after considering the available investment return in early 2014.

5. Ms Sharon TSAI further informed the meeting that the funding schemes and activities of the ECF would henceforth rely mainly on the investment returns generated from the capital injection. For this reason, the ECF Committee considered it necessary to adopt budgetary control to sustain the long-term operations of the ECF, and to adjust the current mode of handling applications for ECF grants. The ECF Committee had also taken the opportunity to consider ways to enhance fairness and accountability in the processing of funding applications. After deliberations, the ECF Committee agreed that in future, invitation for applications for each funding scheme should be called at scheduled intervals, so that applications could be considered on a competition basis on account of the merits of individual applications. The frequency of invitations would be determined based on the nature of projects of each funding scheme, but there should be no less than one round of invitation each year. Based on these principles, the ECF Committee agreed to revise the applications assessment framework including broad principles and key issues for each funding scheme. The broad assessment framework for the RTDC funding scheme as agreed by the ECF Committee was set out at Appendix 2 to RPSVSC Paper 16/2013-14. Ms TSAI reported that the ECF Committee decided that the various Vetting Subcommittees should further consider the detailed arrangements for the assessment mechanism including the implementation details for funding schemes within their respective purview.

6. Ms Sharon TSAI said that for management purposes, the ECF Committee had adopted 4 September 2013 as a cut-off date for applications received under the existing mechanism, and agreed that applications received after the cut-off date should be considered together with applications received under the invitations to be scheduled under individual funding schemes. The ECF Committee also agreed that the Vetting Subcommittees should immediately consider those applications already in hand according to the existing assessment arrangements.

7. Ms Sharon TSAI told the meeting that the ECF Committee had specifically tasked the various Vetting Subcommittees, including RPSVSC, to

manage the deployment of the budget allocated for funding schemes within their purview, including considering the amount to be reserved for existing applications and applications received under the new invitation system. The Vetting Subcommittees were also requested to draw up the detailed assessment arrangements based on the board principles and the endorsed assessment framework, and to finalize the implementation details for their funding schemes. They should also convene meetings with a view to clearing the applications already in hand as soon as possible. She reported to the meeting that up to the cut-off date of 4 September 2013, a total of 44 applications were received under the RTDC funding scheme, a summary of which was sent to Members together with RPSVSC Paper 16/2013-14 for reference. Ms TSAI also informed the meeting that as agreed by the ECF Committee, a briefing session on the revised assessment mechanism of various ECF funding schemes would be arranged for relevant organizations and other potential ECF applicants shortly, so as to draw their interests in pursuing worthwhile projects under the schedule of the ECF, and ensure that funding would be utilized in supporting programmes that best meet the community's needs.

8. Ms Sharon TSAI informed Members that as a related issue, the ECF Committee also considered, at its meeting on 4 September 2013, a suggestion from Mr LAM Chiu-ying (who was also a member of the ECF Committee) for inclusion of local biodiversity surveys and related studies under "biodiversity in Hong Kong" in the existing list of priority research themes. The ECF Committee noted that there was an established system under RPSVSC for updating the list of research priority themes, and considered that Mr LAM's suggestion should be referred to the RPSVSC for follow up. Ms TSAI explained that under the existing arrangements, RPSVSC would identify priority research themes in consultation with the Environment Bureau (ENB) and Environmental Protection Department (EPD) on a bi-yearly basis, and that the current priority themes would be valid up to end of March 2014. She told the meeting that ENB and EPD had just started a review on the subject with a view to offering their input to RPSVSC for consideration in updating the current priority themes. She reported that in response to Mr LAM's request, his suggestion had been passed to ENB and EPD for consideration in the course of their review. Taking into account the position of the matter, the meeting agreed that Mr LAM's suggestion should be considered in one go when ENB's and EPD's input for updating the existing priority themes was available.

9.*

10.*

11.*

12.*

13.*

14.*

15.*

16.*

17.*

18.*

19.*

20.*

21.*

22. After further deliberations, the Chairman concluded the meeting's views on the revised arrangements under the revised assessment mechanism for RTDC projects, as follows:

(a) Programme approach

The existing arrangements for identifying and promulgating priority research themes would continue to be adopted. To allow greater flexibility for RTDC projects to meet the prevailing needs of the community, in future if RPVSC considered that there was a need to review and revise the list of priority themes before its expiry, or to revise the validity duration of the list, RPVSC could discuss and reach a decision, after consulting ENB and EPD.

(b) Project duration

The project duration for each project should normally be not more than three years, unless with very strong justifications.

(c) Funding cap for individual applications

A funding cap of \$2.5 million for each research and/or technology demonstration project, regardless of the project duration, should be

introduced. Exceptional consideration for a budget exceeding \$2.5 million might be given, if only RPVSC was satisfied that the proposed project was exceptionally meritorious with outcomes highly beneficial for improvement of the local environment. For conference projects, the existing funding cap, i.e. \$500,000, or 70% of the total actual expenditure, whichever is the less, should continue to apply.

(d) Assessment of applications

The existing three-level vetting arrangements for applications according to the requested budget, including the double-blind and single-blind system for independent review of applications exceeding \$500,000 and \$2 million respectively, should continue to be adopted. To ensure that only the most meritorious projects would be granted funding support, in assessing individual applications in future, RPVSC should critically review the merits of each project proposal having regard to the enhanced list of assessment criteria at Appendix, and to consider supporting only applications which were considered agreeable in all aspects.

To facilitate RPVSC in considering proposed projects on a competition basis on account of their merits, relevant departments and external assessors should be invited to provide, on top of the existing preliminary review arrangements, an overall rating for each application, which would be used for reference by RPVSC. A budget for deployment at each meeting should be determined, and RPVSC should screen out those projects not worth supporting. In case the budget allocated for a particular meeting was insufficient to fully meet the funding requirements of supported projects assessed at the meeting, RPVSC could then consider further screening out the relatively less meritorious projects or marginal cases. In addition, partial funding support could also be considered having regard to the merits of individual applications.

(e) Open invitations

For 2013-14, the meeting agreed that processing and assessment of the 44 applications already received by 4 September should be

completed within the financial year. The budget of \$14 million allocated by the ECF Committee for RTDC projects in 2013-14 should be reserved solely for use of these applications.

From 2014-15 onwards, an open invitation for applications for the RTDC funding scheme should be issued once every year, say, in February / March, after the budget allocation for RTDC projects in the coming year was decided by the ECF Committee. The cut-off / closing date for the invitation should fall on 31 October of the year. Taking into consideration the timeframe required for completing the assessment of applications in hand, the first invitation for RTDC projects should be issued around February / March 2014.

The budget allocated for RTDC projects would also be announced together with the invitation. Applications would continue to be accepted after 31 October; however, these would only be considered together with applications received in response to the invitation issued in the subsequent year. The budget for RTDC projects allocated by the ECF Committee early each year would be reserved for use of projects received under the invitation issued in February / March that year (including those applications received after the cut-off / closing date of the previous round of invitation, i.e. 31 October in the previous year). Any unused allocation for the year should be returned to the ECF for re-allocation.

Meetings of RPSVC would be convened every three to four months to consider applications for which preliminary review by relevant departments and external assessors (as appropriate) was completed. Processing of all applications (including assessment by RPSVC) received by the cut-off / closing date of 31 October in a year should be completed within that financial year (i.e. by 31 March in the subsequent year).

- (f) The existing arrangements for evaluation of project results and effectiveness through review of the planned and achieved deliverables as well as publicity or technology transfer plans should continue to be adopted.

23. Ms Sharon TSAI informed the meeting that based on Members' agreement on the revised assessment arrangements, the Secretariat would follow up to update the assessment form for departments, external assessors and RPSVC for Members' consideration. The Guide to Application and application form for RTDC projects would also be amended accordingly. In

addition, the Secretariat would arrange further meetings for Members to consider the 44 applications received by 4 September 2013 by batches.

Agenda Item 4: Project Variations and Completion

(a). *Project 11/2008 Antibiotics and antibiotic resistant genes in potable water and soil environment of Hong Kong [RPVSC Paper 17/2013-14]*

24. Ms Sharon TSAI reported that the project ECF 11/2008 aimed to assess the antibiotics levels and antibiotic resistant genes in the water and soil environments of Hong Kong. The project work was completed and was now ready for Members' consideration on whether project completion should be endorsed. The Principal Investigator (PI) of the project had also taken the opportunity to seek Members' approval for various proposed budget variations before finalizing the project account.

25. Note

26. Note

27. After further deliberations, the meeting approved the proposed budget variations and endorsed the project completion.

(b). *Project 12/2008 The impacts of south China monsoon climate variability and El Niño on Hong Kong air quality [RPVSC Paper 17/2013-14]*

28. Ms Sharon TSAI reported that the project ECF 17/2013-14 aimed to study the relationships between climate conditions and air quality in Hong Kong. The project work was completed and was ready for Members' consideration on whether project completion should be endorsed. The PI of the project had also taken the opportunity to seek Members' approval for various proposed budget variations before finalizing the project account.

29. Note

30. Note

31. Note

32. Note

33. Note

34. After further deliberations, the meeting decided that the PI should organize a workshop for at least 30 participants from government, private, business and academic sectors to present and disseminate the findings and deliverables of the project. The PI should provide relevant details of the workshop and a name list of participants to ECF for record. Subject to the PI's satisfactory compliance with the above requests, RPVSC would consider endorsing the completion of the present project. As regards the requested budget variations, the meeting decided that the salary of the Research Fellow employed for the project should be capped at the maximum monthly salary for a Senior Research Assistant (i.e, \$28,450/ month) under the RTDC funding scheme, and that the total expenditure for the item of "Manpower" should be capped at the original approved budget of \$191,880. The meeting also requested the Secretariat to further verify the expenditure of \$19,900 incurred under the project's approved item of "2 Workshops". In the event the expenditure was spent on attending international conference or other activities outside the scope of the approved budget item, such expenditure should not be reimbursed by ECF.

Agenda Item 6: Any Other Business

(a) Woo Wheelock Green Fund

35.*

(b) Conditions for Use of ECF Grants

36. Considering a number of PIs' failure to seek prior approval for budget variation requests, Mr Victor KWONG pointed out the need to remind recipient organizations and PIs that budget variations should only be made with ECF's prior approval, and to draw their attention that over-spending in particular budget items or expenditure on unapproved items would not be reimbursed. In response to Mr Victor KWONG's further suggestion of organizing a briefing session for applicant and recipient organizations, Ms Anita TSUI said that the Secretariat would take the opportunity of the coming briefing on the revised assessment mechanism of ECF to remind existing and potential applicants about the need to duly observe ECF's funding rules when implementing supported projects. The meeting decided that relevant provisions concerning the use of ECF grants, including the need to seek prior approval for project variations, should be highlighted in the approval letter for supported projects.

Agenda Item 6: Date of Next Meeting

37. The next meeting would be arranged tentatively in November 2013. The Secretariat would inform Members of the details once available.

38. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 6 p.m.

**Secretariat, ECF Research Projects Vetting Sub-committee
October 2013**

Note:

The paragraph will not be included in the version of notes to be uploaded to the webpage of ECF according to the standing practice of not disclosing the detailed reasons for supporting or rejecting an application and / or the performance and other matters related to a specific organization or person. The ECF webpage contains a general disclaimer that "Reasons for supporting/rejecting an application had been made known to the project proponents concerned, and the public could ask the project proponents direct for such information".

* To avoid inhibiting the frankness and candour of discussions and advice given to the ECF, this paragraph will not be included in the version of notes to be uploaded to the webpage of ECF.

Environmental Research, Technology Demonstration and Conference Projects

Revised Assessment Criteria

- (a) Will the project contribute to environmental protection and conservation in Hong Kong? What are the benefits that it will bring to Hong Kong's environment, ecology, flora and fauna, etc. or the extent to which it will enhance the environmental awareness of the local community?

*[Note: According to the Guide to Application, **environmental research and technology demonstration projects** should have contributions in a direct and practical way towards environmental improvement and conservation of the local environment. For **technology demonstration projects** in particular, they should promote and encourage the adoption of technologies by different sectors in Hong Kong; the benefits must accrue to one or more industries, and not just to individual companies. Successful projects should be publicized so as to disseminate the results of completed projects and to ensure widespread adoption of the technologies by relevant sectors. **International conferences** should facilitate exchange of best practices, expertise and experience on environmental and conservation issues and raise Hong Kong's profile as a leading green city.]*

*Based on the RTDC funding schemes' objectives above, only projects expected to be able to **contribute directly to environmental protection and conservation** would be funded under the funding scheme. Hence, projects which could offer results of **reference value only** should be critically reviewed on whether they should be supported.]*

- (b) Is there a demonstrable need for the project?
- (c) The technical and project management capability of the applicant (notably the Principal Investigator and Co-investigators), as well as the past performance of the applicant, including the effectiveness of past projects, and the applicant's ability to comply with the funding conditions.
- (d) Is the proposed project's schedule of implementation / milestones well planned and practicable, and the project duration reasonable?
- (e) Is the proposed budget prudent, realistic and cost-effective, with full justification for every expenditure item?

- (f) Does the proposed project have alternative sources of funding support?
- (g) Should the proposed project be more appropriately funded by other sources?
- (h) Is the project duplicating or likely to duplicate the work already done or currently carried out by other groups?
- (i) If recurrent expenditure is incurred, whether the proposed project has potential to become self-sufficient after a certain period of time?
- (j) Are the planned **deliverables as well as technology transfer and dissemination plan** for dissemination and promotion of the project deliverables clearly defined, implementable, effective and value for money?
[Note: This is essential to facilitate RPVSC in assessing the effectiveness of project results upon project completion.]
- (k) Is there any potential for the technology and other products delivered under the project to be widely adopted or utilized? (e.g. whether the relevant Government departments are prepared to use the findings, results, and other deliverables of the projects?)
- (l) For projects on international conference, could the proposed conference effectively facilitate exchange of best practices, expertise and experience on environmental and conservation issues and raise Hong Kong's profile as a leading green city?

* * *