



## CROWDS FEEL THE FESTIVE WARMTH

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Edward Yau, right, says a raft of measures will be introduced to combat pollution.

# CLEARING THE AIR

### New laws by 2014 to meet WHO standards



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### Kenneth Foo

A breath of fresh air is on the way at last – if you can hold out to 2014.

That's the date for tying Hong Kong pollution gauges to air-quality standards of the World Health Organization.

And new measures to clear the foul air will include car-free zones, more railways and scrapping old polluting vehicles.

Secretary for the Environment Edward Yau Tang-wah yesterday revealed a series of steps to update the Air Quality Objectives.

Seven types of emissions will be monitored, and sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide and lead will be subject to the most stringent standards of the WHO.

The remainder – including respirable and fine particulates – will be monitored according to the lower end of WHO standards. The objectives will be reviewed every five years.

But some experts slammed the moves as not tough enough.

Anthony Hedley, honorary professor of the School of Public Health at the University of Hong Kong, accused the government of setting up "lax and interim targets that masquerade as long-term solutions to a problem that requires more drastic action."

You said the government will adopt the new standards as the benchmark for conducting environmental impact reports for its construction projects.

But there will be a three-year transitional period for private developments to adjust to the new rules.

"For the standards to be implemented, clearly defined goals, effective means and an emission-reduction package with the consensus of the people are of paramount importance," Yau said.

He declined to estimate the social and economic costs of the new objectives.

They come as Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, who had pledged to

clean up the city's air, enters the last months of his administration.

During his election campaign in 2006, he vowed a "blue sky" policy.

While pollutants from the mainland have declined following an emission control pact with the Guangdong government, pollution from vehicles has hurt efforts.

The Airport Authority backed the proposed new objectives and will use them if the government allows it to build a third runway.

The authority said it will follow them for conducting air-quality assessments.

It also backed the retirement of old vehicles and a tree-planting campaign.

A spokesman for the Hong Kong General Chamber of Chamber supported the moves as it said pollution is the top environmental concern of business.

But campaigners are critical.

The head of environmental strategy at Civic Exchange, Mike Kilburn, said: "It is a move that we have been waiting years for years but we are extremely disappointed as the objectives are not strict enough to make any positive impact on air quality."

Hedley said public health safety demands that the cap on sulfur dioxide should be set much lower than the proposed rate of 125 micrograms per cubic meter.

The University of Hong Kong yesterday released an update of its Hedley Environmental Index, which shows the impact of pollution on public health.

The new index will have a map showing real-time levels of pollutants at 14 monitoring stations and will benchmark itself to WHO standards.

Based on calculations made from the index, experts have raised their estimates to an average of 3,200 deaths annually – compared with 1,000 made in the previous study.

Economic loss is estimated to be HK\$40 billion a year. staffreporter@singtaonewscorp.com



Anthony Hedley