

**Business Facilitation Advisory Committee
Wholesale and Retail Task Force**

***Voluntary Scheme for Phasing Out
Personal Care and Cosmetic Products Containing Microbeads***

Purpose

The Chief Executive promulgated in the 2019 Policy Address Supplement the implementation of a voluntary scheme for phasing out personal care and cosmetic products (PCCPs) containing microbeads (“the Scheme”) to encourage the trade to stop manufacturing, importing or selling such products, with a view to gradually eliminating them in Hong Kong. This paper briefs Members on the plan and associated supporting measures of the Scheme.

Background

2. Microbeads are added to some rinse-off PCCPs for providing specific functions such as scrubbing, exfoliating and cleansing. After the use of these rinse-off products, the microbeads will be drained into sewerage systems. The majority of these microbeads will be removed in sewage treatment works, whereas the rest will be discharged together with treated effluent into the marine environment.

3. The potential threat of microbeads in the marine environment to marine ecosystems and human health through food chain transfer have attracted worldwide attention. At present, further studies are pending to substantiate the impact of microbead pollution, besides, few scientific evidence is available regarding the direct impact of microbeads on human health. Nevertheless, microbeads are regarded as the only source of

microplastics “intentionally released” into the ocean. As a result, various source control measures have emerged targeting on these microbeads.

4. The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) completed a consultancy study in March 2020 to review the international trend of controlling PCCPs containing microbeads, collate and analyse relevant local market information, and recommend viable control options for Hong Kong. The consultancy study found two mainstream approaches adopted across the world, namely voluntary phasing-out and legislative control, for the progressively replacement of microbeads with alternatives in these products.

5. As for the situation in Hong Kong, PCCP products in the local market are mostly imported, from many places of origin that have already adopted different means and scope of banning the manufacturing of some microbead-containing products. In recent years, some multinational companies and unions have pledged and taken voluntary actions to phase out microbeads and replace them with natural alternatives (e.g. salt crystals, nut shells) in their products via reformulation, while some retailers have started to cease the sale of PCCPs containing microbeads or gradually reduce their stock of these products. With the advent of more jurisdictions promulgating new regulations, coupled with the limited shelf-life of the PCCPs, it is anticipated that not many products containing microbeads will remain in the local market.

6. In the event that Hong Kong pursues a regulatory approach, the process will be quite lengthy and will involve steps of formulating an appropriate and clear regulatory approach, establishing testing standards that will not become an importation barrier, consulting various stakeholders in the trade, going through the legislative procedure, and allowing time for the industry to clear out their stock. Hence, be it a transitional arrangement amid the legislative process or a response to the society’s strong aspirations, a voluntary phase-out scheme is in dire need

such that Hong Kong can keep pace with the international trend of eliminating products containing microbeads for protecting the marine ecosystems.

The Scheme

7. Based on the consultant's recommendation, the Government will initially implement the Scheme for a two-year period and review its effectiveness at a later stage to ascertain the need for further tightening the control of products containing microbeads in Hong Kong. Making reference to successful experience from other jurisdictions, the Government is planning to launch a "Microbead-free Charter" (the Charter) in collaboration with the trade. Participants, taking due consideration of their operational conditions, may set their own targets and timetables for ceasing or reducing the manufacture, import and sale of PCCPs containing microbeads and strive to achieve the targets within the set time frame. In the course of the Scheme, the Government will follow up on the participants' phase-out progress, and review the phase-out status of the PCCPs containing microbeads in the local retail market. At the same time, the Government will launch complementary publicity and education activities to enhance public's understanding of microbead-related subjects and facilitate consumers in choosing microbead-free products.

8. The Charter will be implemented by the EPD. PCCP manufacturers, importers (agents/distributors), retailers, hair dressing/beauty salons and trade associations, etc. will be invited to join the Charter in multiple ways apt for their different business modes. Among them, manufacturers and importers will take the lead to stop/reduce the manufacture/import of PCCPs containing microbeads, while the retailers and hairdressing/beauty salons may promote microbead-free products to their consumers. Industry associations and all other participant groups will work together to promote the Scheme to their business partners and publicise microbead-related information

through different platforms.

9. Trade members who would like to participate in the Scheme only need to submit an application form and relevant documents required for their corresponding participant groups. For examples, manufacturers and importers shall submit the information of their brands and product lines, and plans on phasing-out microbeads or relevant supporting documents of microbeads being phased-out; while all participants will be required to provide their plan and schedule for promotion or training.

Microbead Definition and Product Scope of the Charter

10. Making reference to microbead definitions adopted in global regulatory approaches, the EPD defines microbeads as solid plastic particles smaller than 5mm in size, and intentionally added in rinse-off PCCPs for scrubbing, exfoliating or cleaning purposes. The Charter will cover exfoliators and other rinse-off PCCPs for face, body, hair, mouth, etc.

Supporting Measures

11. The EPD will publicise and timely update a list of merchants that have joined the “Microbead-free Charter” as well as a list of microbead-free brands (when brands are phasing-out microbeads, the list will also include their microbead-free product lines or categories) provided by the merchants, with a view to facilitating consumers to purchase such products. The EPD will take random samples among participants’ microbead-free products available in the local market for verification to ensure information in the lists is valid.

12. Apart from providing enquiry services, the EPD will also promote the Scheme to the public and the trade through a thematic webpage and other social media platforms, such as designing interactive online games to introduce basic information on microbeads to the public, organising

workshops to provide advanced training on microbead-related issues to staff of participants so that they can convey, in turn, appropriate and accurate information to consumers. Moreover, the EPD will organise promotional activities such as launching and award presentation ceremonies. Participants will be given the Charter's logo and certificates for display in their outlets and promotional materials, and those who actively phase out microbeads and promote the Scheme will also be commended with awards as tokens of appreciation.

13. There will be three groups of awards in the Charter, including "Microbead-free Brands", "Microbeads Phase-out Awards" and "Partnership Recognition". "Microbead-free Brands" will be awarded to brands that have phased out microbeads in all products. Manufacturers and importers who are phasing out microbeads can contend for "Microbeads Phase-out Awards" based on their phase-out achievement. All participating organisations will be awarded with "Partnership Recognition" upon fulfilling stipulated requirements for promoting the Scheme to the trade and the public.

The Progress

14. The EPD held a briefing meeting for the trade in October 2020 to introduce the draft plan of the Charter and collected their feedback on the mode and design of the Scheme by the end of November last year. By and large, the trade responded positively and supported the implementation of the Scheme to phase out PCCPs containing microbeads. In light of feedbacks from the trade, the EPD is now enhancing implementation details of the Scheme. On the other hand, the EPD is working with the service contractor to prepare for the launch of the Scheme in 2021, featured with an opening ceremony and a series of campaign activities.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to note and offer views on the Government's work on the Scheme.

Environmental Protection Department

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