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New waste charging scheme is a good start for addressing food waste in Hong Kong but long-term strategies need to be done, recycle experts say

By Molpasorn Shoowong
JMSC Reporter
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HONG KONG - In Sheung Shui, a suburb town of Hong Kong, Shawn Ho is checking leftover vegetables and coffee grounds in several bins in the collection area of his 15,000 square feet composting site.

Ho is a founder of Foodcycle Plus, a social enterprise working on upcycling high quality food waste such as Chinese herbal tea waste, tofu waste, and brewery waste from factories into organic compost products, along with helping sort food waste mixed with other types of waste for the government's recycling center.

Food waste is the largest type of municipal waste, which already accounts for 70% of waste dumped in landfills, generating 7% of greenhouse gases in Hong Kong according to the government report in 2019.

The issue had also been addressed in the recent COP26 climate change summit where the Food and Drink Federation launched a new handbook for the food and drink industry in the U.K.

Hong Kong recycling experts said the new municipal waste charging scheme launched this year is a good start to reduce food waste, but other long-term strategies should also be thought of.

In August, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong passed a municipal waste charging legislation which will be implemented officially in 2023.

The scheme makes residents or small shops pay for unsorted waste they produce by charging on various sizes of designated green bags. It also charged commercial and industrial businesses for "gate fee" based on the weight of their unsorted waste.

In other words, it is hoped to push them to separate different types of waste, including food waste for the recycler to collect without paying any fee.

“If you put the money tag on the food waste or the waste, then people will think more,” said Ho. “This kind of message is very very important to promote waste sorting from the waste producer.”

Despite that, Ho added that educating people should come together with government action that offers help for people to recycle well.

Similarly, Kenny Wong, a sustainability expert from Hong Kong Productivity Council said “In my own opinion, the waste charging has already got a very good financial incentive for people to be in charge.”

Hong Kong Productivity Council has been working on teaching over 150 food and beverage outlets in Hong Kong about food waste sorting.

The organization also invented a temporary food waste storing machine for installing in food outlets, which help sort the waste, and store for about one week without unpleasant odor, therefore, reducing the highly costed immediate waste transportation to recycling centers.

Wong further gave a more advanced example of utilizing “landfill bills” which is not implemented in Hong Kong. It will get food producers to recycle their waste and donate surplus products by mandatory, different from the waste charging scheme in which waste producers can weigh the cost between sorting and not sorting.

On the other hand, Olivier Habimana, an assistant professor who teaches food waste management at the University of Hong Kong, said he was worried about the designated green bag usage in the long term.

“What are we putting in those bags and what happens to those bags is the question,” said Habimana.

“They’re going to end up in the landfill, then, what’s gained?” said Habimana.

He suggested adopting tax cuts as an incentive for people to reduce waste.

He also emphasized on improving a community waste sorting infrastructure where food waste is efficiently sorted without mixing with other types of waste. He said it can be effective in the long run.

Photo:



"Mixo Plus" - Organic compost product by FoodCycle+/ Molpasorn Shoowong



Vegetable leftovers collected at FoodCycle+/ Molpasorn Shoowong



Shawn Ho, founder of FoodCycle+ observing several food wastes bins/ Molpasorn Shoowong



Inside the composting machine station at FoodCycle+/ Molpasorn Shoowong



Compost resting in curing area until become fully mature to be packed in products at FoodCycle+/ Molpasorn Shoowong