

Blue-sky thinking promotes cleanup

Air quality in northern city cluster improves as control efforts set to intensify

By HOU LIQIANG

In his 10 years as an environmental law enforcement officer, Yin Wei has never known his schedule to be as tight as when he was sent to the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei cluster as part of a yearlong program to monitor air pollution control.

During the three weeks he spent in Handan, in North China's Hebei province, Yin got up at 6 am but did not get to bed before midnight. He spent his days inspecting companies, either openly or covertly, and looking for any violations of pollution regulations. "We only had half an hour for lunch," he said, referring to the hectic schedule.

The native of Lyuliang, in North China's Shanxi province, and his colleagues would arrive back at their hotel at about 7 pm every evening, and then rush to send details of violations or illegal behavior to the Ministry of Environmental Protection by 9 pm. After that, they scoured complaints submitted to local authorities, looking for clues to potential irregularities, and then selected the companies they would inspect the following day.

Every company may be inspected several times and the inspection records will be handed on to successive teams, he said.

Yin, whose four-strong team was among the first to be dispatched, is one of 5,600 officers taking part in the largest-ever air pollution control operation in North China. The assignment started on April 5, although most of the teams only take part in the inspection for two weeks at a time.

Even though the inspection has made progress and air quality in the cluster has been improved, work to control air pollution in the region will be intensified. Meanwhile, as the inspection draws to a close, the authorities have been drafting a new three-year operation dubbed a "blue sky protection campaign". As a follow-up measure, a number of leading experts will work to draft air pollution measures tailored to the situations in each of the 28 major cities in the cluster, according to officials.

The inspections continued in line with an action plan released by the Ministry of Environmental Protection in August that ordered the cities to reduce concentrations of PM2.5 — dangerous particulate matter with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers that can enter the bloodstream via the lungs — by at least 15 percent between October and March.

In addition to checking the implementation of air pollution controls by local governments and assessing emissions' monitoring equipment at businesses, the inspectors have closed small plants that were

responsible for high levels of emissions.

According to Liu Youbin, a ministry spokesman, inspectors have investigated conditions at 210,000 companies and discovered 36,000 violations of the regulations. The ministry has also supervised the handling of 20,000 serious violations.

Initially, about 9,000 companies were included in a list of heavily polluting businesses that were ordered to lower or suspend production during periods of heavy air pollution. The number has now risen to 50,000, and about 62,000 poorly managed polluting enterprises have been closed or relocated, or have upgraded their equipment, Liu said at a news conference on Feb 27.

The inspection has effectively underlined the need to enforce the laws related to the environment, and in a bid to prevent local interests from undermining the inspections, none of the enforcement officers come from the cities they are inspecting, he added.

"The experience gained during the inspection has been highly instructive, and I believe the model could be promoted in other parts of the country during future efforts to enforce the environmental laws," he said.

At present, environmental law enforcement officers are allocated evenly across the country, instead of being concentrated in the areas that require the most stringent inspections and enforcement, according to a leading official.

"The areas with the highest levels of pollution require the biggest control efforts, so they should be allocated more high-level enforcement officers, but that isn't happening at the moment. However, the inspection has been a good attempt to optimize the allocation of law enforcement personnel," said Liu Bingjiang, head of air quality management at the ministry.

Recent research and analysis have found that even though they cover no more than 3 percent of the country's territory, the 28 cities in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei cluster discharge 10 percent of total emissions of sulfur dioxide and volatile organic compounds, as well as 15 percent of nitric oxide and primary particulates. Coal burning, industrial production and vehicles are major contributors to PM2.5 in the region, according to the ministry.

"Previously, when the region was hit by heavy air pollution, many local governments ordered businesses to lower production, but their actions were based on an incomplete list of companies that produced the most pollution. Instead of taking the initiative to reduce emissions, many governments simply waited for strong winds to disperse pollutants," said Liu Bingjiang.

He added that after spending three months combing through companies in the cluster, the inspectors have drawn up a list of the 50,000 companies that cause the most pollution.

The list has enabled enforcement officers to deepen their inspections and ensure emissions are being reduced, and the checks will continue until the air quality in the cluster improves to a suitable level, according to Liu Bingjiang. "Instead of leaving law enforcement officers scattered across the country, the ministry will place greater emphasis on a small number of key tasks every year, and once we start, we will keep going until our mission is complete," he said.

According to the ministry, the central government's efforts to tackle severe air pollution in the cluster have been successful. The annual average concentration of PM2.5 fell by almost 40 percent after the government launched a five-year nationwide campaign to reduce air pollution in 2013. For example, the average concentration of PM2.5 in the capital fell by 31.5 micrograms per cubic meter from the 89.5 recorded in 2013 to 58 mcg per cu m last year.

However, attempts to further improve the air quality in the cluster are likely to face more challenges. "Research conducted by several leading climate experts has shown that the winds generated during monsoons in East Asia are becoming weaker, and global warming is likely to make the lower and middle levels of the regional atmosphere more stable. Those factors will result in more frequent smog," said Liu Bingjiang.

He Kebin, dean of the School of Environment at Tsinghua University, said 500 researchers have been dispatched to the 28 cities to conduct research and offer guidance for pollution control work. The researchers' primary task is to draft a detailed three-year action plan for the cities, along with a long-term road map to improve air quality in the region, said He, who is also deputy director of a national joint research center on the causes and control of air pollution.

Liu Bingjiang said the ministry is determined to eradicate air pollution in the smog-plagued region.

"When the air quality is good, we should still have a sense of crisis," he said, noting that there is still a lot to do to permanently ensure blue skies.

"However, when it is not, we should be confident that we will be victorious in the blue sky protection campaign."

By the end of February, air pollution inspectors had checked

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companies and discovered

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violations as part of a yearlong inspection launched in April in 28 cities in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei cluster.

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Yearlong inspections push clean agenda