

New move aims to protect Yangtze

Measures to curb pollution, restore biodiversity enacted in policy

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China has scaled up policy to protect and restore the environment around the Yangtze River, putting in place measures to treat industrial and agricultural pollutants, revive the diversity of aquatic life and protect grasslands and wetlands. A policy document jointly released by 17 central government departments on Sept 19 pledged to prioritize effort and adopt a holistic way of conserving the mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands and sands of the Yangtze River Basin area.

It set the goal of ensuring that all water in the river basin area meets standards for second-tier classification by the end of 2025. China classifies water quality according to a five-tier system.

Other key targets include ensuring the harmless disposal of at least 97 percent of the garbage produced in Yangtze River Economic Belt counties, eliminating polluted water bodies in urban areas, recycling at least 80 percent of animal waste from livestock and poultry farms and continuously improving biodiversity.

The policy document follows a 10-year fishing ban in the Yangtze enacted by the government in 2020 in response to dwindling fish stocks and declining biodiversity, which also included measures to help ensure the livelihoods of river fishermen.

An official with the Ministry of Ecology and Environment said in a statement after the release of the document that despite improvements to the Yangtze's water quality in recent years, the rise of nonpoint source pollution — the result of precipitation that carries natural and human-made pollutants into waterways — has emerged as a major problem.

Other threats to the river's ecosystem include the shrinking of wetlands in some areas, and the imbalance in aquatic life and algal blooms in some key lakes.

Ma Jun, director of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, a nongovernmental organization, said the importance of the Yangtze and its river basin area lies behind the official move to strengthen environmental protection and ecological restoration in recent years.

Data from the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences showed that the Yangtze River Basin accounts for 35 percent of China's water resources, contributes to 35.4 percent of national GDP and is home to 33 percent of the population.

Ma noted that the latest document has detailed a host of policy measures to be adopted in the next three years, involving 17 central government departments and 11 provincial regions, which demonstrated the strong level of commitment among policymakers.

The document laid out measures for ensuring the safety of drinking water for residents living in the river basin area, calling for authorities to map out conservation zones for drinking water sources at the township level.

To promote the treatment of sewage in urban areas, it stressed the need for a systemic approach, which will require the establishment of



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long-term mechanisms to prevent the return of polluted water bodies.

The treatment of pollution from industrial parks and the agricultural sector is another priority, as the government looks to install tighter controls over pollutants discharged by chemical factories and promote higher efficiency in the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

The upgrading of large-scale livestock and poultry farms along the Yangtze will also be given priority so that animal waste can be recycled at a lower cost and through mechanization.

Ma said that the measures represented a shift in the focus of pollution treatment measures from urban areas to rural areas, from industry to the agricultural sector and from areas that are easily accessible to the hinterlands.

"The measures show that a stronger emphasis has been placed on preventing pollutants such as waste, pesticides and fertilizers that threat-

en the environment of water bodies," he said.

He noted that the policymakers have paid particular attention to treating phosphorus runoff, a major cause of algal blooms in freshwater bodies, and heavy metal pollution.

Researchers from the Chinese Academy of Environmental Planning said in a research note last year that phosphorus has emerged as the top pollutant in the Yangtze, with the area's many phosphate mines and chemical plants the major source.

The document called for Hubei and Guizhou provinces, regions with a large number of phosphate mines and plants, to devise stringent requirements for the discharging of phosphorus. It also set out requirements for monitoring and treating the dangers resulting from manganese, cadmium and other heavy metals discharged by industries.

Ma said the large number of tailings dams — large embankments built to store mine waste — that can

be found in the upper and middle reaches of the Yangtze pose another significant threat to the environment, describing them as "potential time bombs".

The government has set a target of sharply reducing the number of these dams before the end of 2025, and of completing pollution control of all tailings dams located within 3 kilometers of the river by the end of next year.

Li Haisheng, a researcher with the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences, wrote in a co-authored note in May that rare and endangered aquatic animals, including the Yangtze finless porpoise and Yangtze sturgeon, are facing an existential crisis as a result of pollution, dwindling lake areas and a fewer food sources.

He highlighted the need to reconstruct habitats for aquatic life in reservoirs to mitigate the influence of dams on river ecosystems and resume the connections

between lakes and rivers to protect biodiversity.

To restore the diversity of aquatic life in the Yangtze, the document said the country will establish a monitoring system for endangered animals and devise an action plan to save them.

The restoration and protection of key habitats will be reinforced, and more work will be done to enhance the connectivity of rivers, as well as unblock channels that are key to the spawning and migration of fish stocks.

Ma said that participation from the general public, especially in terms of sorting waste and blowing the whistle on those responsible for pollution, are key factors that could determine the success of the campaign.

"With the use of big data, digital technology and more information disclosure, the public can play a role in helping preserve and protect the river," he said.

Policy Digest

Anti-drug campaign to target students starts

The Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission and the General Office of the Ministry of Education have issued a notice on the launch of an anti-drug campaign targeting students, the China Police Daily reported.

Local authorities should educate students on the harm of narcotics and how to avoid them, and help them understand that they should cherish their lives, the notice said.

According to the notice, the authorities should organize activities, including setting up anti-drug exhibitions and holding class discussions and quizzes to strengthen student awareness.

The authorities should thoroughly examine security standards at schools, fix any loopholes they find, and take concrete measures to keep narcotics off campuses, the notice emphasized.

Identifying autism focus of guideline

The National Health Commission has issued an experimental guideline for autism screening among children aged 6 and under to more effectively find those suffering from the disorder and provide them with treatment.

The best time to treat children with autism is at the age of 6 and under, the commission said, pointing out that symptoms may be eased if children are subject to intervention before age 3.

Local health authorities should promote basic knowledge of autism, as well as information about screening, diagnosis and intervention, so that parents will take the initiative to seek services for their children, the guideline said.

Grassroots-level health institutions such as township hospitals and community health service centers should conduct preliminary autism screenings.

Authorities are required to test the psychological and behavioral development of every child 11 times before the age of 6 — four times in their first year, four times between the ages of 1 and 3, and three times between the ages of 4 and 6.

The guideline lays out the process for transferring children with abnormal preliminary test results for further testing or further diagnosis, and requires hospitals to offer solutions to parents of autistic children.

Hospitals should also provide information about the government's assistance policies and institutions that are qualified to offer intervention.

Rehabilitation facilities should provide services for autistic children as soon as possible, design plans according to individual conditions, and are required to use methods that are evidence-based and guarantee sufficient daily intervention.

The guideline also encourages parents to participate in the process.

National skill centers to be developed for talent

China will aim to support the development of at least 400 national training centers for skilled talent and at least 500 national studios for "masters of skills" between this year and 2025 to nurture the growth of urgently needed professionals, according to a plan issued earlier this month.

It will prioritize the development of centers in advanced manufacturing industries and strategic emerging industries, according to the plan jointly issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Ministry of Finance.

China will also prioritize the development of centers in sectors related to well-being, such as daycare, nursing, elderly care and domestic services.

The plan sets the qualifications provincial authorities should follow when deciding which institutions should be certified as training centers or studios, and says the government will subsidize institutions that are certified.

WANG QINGYUN

Action plan looks to safeguard Yellow River's environment

By XU WEI

The latest national action plan for protecting the Yellow River has laid out a host of measures on pollution control and prevention, ecological restoration, the protection of biological diversity and afforestation.

Analysts said the policy document, jointly released by 12 central government departments this month, will help tackle some of the most pressing issues facing the Yellow River Basin area, including pollution from industries, urban areas, the agricultural

sector and water shortages.

The Yellow River, often called "the cradle of Chinese civilization", is the second-longest river in the country after the Yangtze River and runs through nine provincial regions, rising on the Tibetan Plateau and flowing into the Bohai Sea.

Lu Jun, deputy head of the Chinese Academy of Environmental Planning, said the latest action plan has given greater priority to ensuring environmental and ecological security in the river basin area.

A major highlight of the action plan was its call for steps to cap the

development of steel, coal chemical, petrochemical and nonferrous metals industries in river basin areas to prevent the discharge of pollutants, he said.

The development of urban environmental infrastructure is another policy priority, as the action plan called for cities and townships located on the river and its major tributaries to ensure full coverage from sewage networks in urban areas.

The action plan set the goal of increasing forest coverage in the river basin area to 21.58 percent, restoring 700,000 hectares of natu-

ral forests and eliminating bodies of black, odorous water in the region.

The action plan also rolls out a host of measures for environmental protection in the river basin area. A number of national parks will be created to enhance the protection of natural forests and wetlands and improve water conservation around the river.

The treatment of soil erosion will be prioritized in the middle reaches of the river, including steps to stop the inflow of sand into the river to alleviate the problem of sedimentation affecting lower reaches.

To strengthen the protection of

biodiversity in the region, the plan included measures for creating better habitats for wildlife and for building up monitoring networks for endangered species. The restoration of migration channels and habitats for fish stocks in the upper reaches of the river was also highlighted.

Lu said that protecting the Yellow River ecology would require coordinated efforts between regions to tackle shared problems, including joint efforts to improve water quality, restore the river ecosystem and respond to climate change.