

CHINA

Beijing confirms 5 cases, tightens virus measures

By DU JUAN
dujuan@chinadaily.com.cn

Beijing is facing a severe and complicated COVID-19 epidemic control and prevention situation as an increasing number of cases have occurred in several districts this week, a senior official said on Thursday.

Beijing reported five new confirmed locally transmitted COVID-19 cases on Thursday, including three who had reported positive nucleic acid tests on Wednesday.

Following that test, a further test confirmed viral infections, bringing the total number of positive and confirmed cases in the latest outbreak to 11.

All of the new patients work in the cold chain industry. The Delta variant of the novel coronavirus was detected in samples collected from those cases.

"The whole genome sequencing of one of the new cases is in accord with a previous case reported on Tuesday, which means they are in the same transmission chain," Pang Xinghuo, deputy director of the Beijing Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said at a news conference.

Pang said that cold chain companies and their supervision departments should tighten control and prevention measures to

ensure disinfection management and safety control of the goods' storage, delivery and sales.

"The employees of the cold chain industry should strengthen their health monitoring and completed vaccinations," she said.

Lang Zhiqiang, an official from the city's market supervision bureau who is in charge of food safety, said at the news conference that all the employees in the city's cold chain industry should take nucleic acid tests every three days instead of every seven days, as previously mandated.

According to the bureau, Beijing has imported 60,000 metric tons of cold chain food in 23,900 batches since Jan 1.

The two residential communities in Fangshan and Fengtai districts where the new cases live were raised to medium-risk areas on Thursday, since more than three confirmed cases have been reported in each area in the past 14 days.

In addition to recent cases with Delta variants, Beijing has reported three cases of Omicron since Saturday.

Xu Hejian, a municipal government spokesperson, said the city will strengthen control and prevention measures to ensure public safety and provide a safe environment for next month's Winter Olympics.



Increased supervision boosts coal mine safety

Surging prices and need for winter heat spur production at illegal operations

By HOU LIQIANG
houliqiang@chinadaily.com.cn

To eliminate emerging safety hazards due to surging coal prices, the Ministry of Emergency Management has vowed to intensify a crackdown on illegal coal mining, as well as enhance supervision of mines tasked with helping meet demand.

"The number of illegal mining cases is rising with strong momentum," Su Jie, a ministry official said at a news conference on Thursday, citing a case in Shanxi province in which 22 people were trapped following a flood at an illegal coal mine on Dec 15 in Duxigou village, Xiaoyi county. After working nonstop for about 45 hours, rescuers managed to lift all the trapped workers to the ground, but two of them were dead.

The illegal mine was located in an "extremely secretive" area. Aside from building a wall to conceal the mine, the miners covered the exit of its channel with steel plates and also placed dirt and weeds over it.

The accident happened after the price for the most commonly traded thermal coal hit a record high of 1,982 yuan (\$312) a metric ton on Oct 19. It has since fallen significantly thanks to government efforts to increase supply during the winter heating season.

Su said the ministry held a video conference the second day after the accident and had rolled out a series of measures to root out illegal mining.

Sixteen teams were established to carry out surprise inspections in major coal production areas, and 14 groups of officers were dispatched to other areas to conduct law enforcement, she said, adding local authorities were ordered to comb every township under their jurisdiction to unearth violations.

The ministry has also strived to help increase coal output. Aside from recently approving 1,677 new coal mines, it gave the green light to 207 other ones to increase production, she said. In total, the mines can help increase the country's annual

coal production capacity by 310 million tons.

Su vowed continued efforts to enable more coal mines to start operation or increase production. The ministry will also offer guidance to some coal mines with safety hazards so that they can address their problems and start production, she said.

In another move to ensure safety, the ministry will urge parent companies to dispatch dedicated work groups to oversee the operation of their mines, she said.

The country had fewer deaths from workplace accidents last year, according to Shen Zhanli, a ministry spokeswoman.

A total of about 34,600 workplace accidents happened across the country in 2021, down 9 percent year-on-year, she said. Casualties decreased by 4 percent to 26,300.

"No especially serious accidents happened in the country during the year," she added.

In China, especially serious accidents usually refer to those that claim more than 30 lives, seriously injure over 100 or cause economic losses that exceed 100 million yuan.



Visitors pose with snowmen at the Sun Island Park during a snow art expo in Harbin, Heilongjiang province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Smaller snowmen a hit with Harbin revelers

By ZHOU HUIYING in Harbin
zhouhuiying@chinadaily.com.cn

Residents and tourists in Harbin, the capital of Northeast China's Heilongjiang province, can easily find unique wintertime experiences through its ice and snow sculptures and rich entertainment offerings.

At the 34th China Harbin Sun Island International Snow Sculpture Art Expo at the Sun Island Park, many visitors are drawn to a group of snowmen when entering the park.

Twenty-eight snowmen in the shapes of small children are distributed throughout the park, with various vivid facial expressions and ornaments featuring traditional Chinese festival elements, such as red lanterns and Chinese knots.

The snowmen, standing around 2 meters tall, also provide great angles for visitors to take photos.

"Every winter we can find several giant snowmen in the city, some of which can be as tall as nearly 20 meters," said Li Jiuyang, the 32-year-old designer of the snowmen. "The giant snowmen have become well known among local residents, tourists and even those who have never come to the city."

"However, I found that it was difficult for people to take good photos with the giant snowmen, whether they stood far away or near, because the snowmen are really too tall. Therefore, I got the idea of making some cute snowmen that can provide tourists with a better interactive experience."

The expo, with an area of 200,000 square meters, is divided into seven parts, providing tourists with a variety of snow sculptures made from more than 55,000 cubic meters of snow.

Five workers following Li's directions spent a week completing all the snowmen.

"We tried a new method that is different from the traditional snow sculptures," he said. "Firstly, we

made two molds with fiber reinforced plastics, each of which can be divided into two parts."

The workers put about 1.5 cubic meters of snow into the mold. Half an hour later, the mold can be picked off and a white snowman is completed.

"To make their facial expressions more vivid and keep longer, we chose photographic paper to make their eyes, noses and mouths," Li said. "Furthermore, we made colorful ornaments to express a traditional Chinese festival atmosphere to greet the upcoming Spring Festival."

Zhou Meichen, an 18-year-old college student in the city, visited the park on Sunday.

"Due to concerns about health security on long journeys, I decided to spend my winter vacation at home instead of traveling outside," she said. "I was surprised to find so many cute snowmen, even though I grew up with snow."

"I took lots of photos with the snowmen and sent them to my classmates who have returned to their homes in other provinces. I feel quite happy and honored to be a resident of the city."

Li, who runs a company focusing on urban landscape design and operation, said the new method of making snow sculptures is a good opportunity to expand his business.

"The new method can greatly reduce the cost of this type of snow landscape," he said.

"We set a price of around 4,000 yuan (\$630) for each snowman using the traditional snow sculpture method, while a snowman made with the mold can cost as little as 500 yuan."

"I believe this kind of snow landscape can be well promoted outside the specialized snow sculpture park, such as in residential communities and kindergartens. Next year I will try to design more molds with different styles, such as Chinese zodiac and popular cartoon images."

FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Village cashes in on wooden rice cookers

By YANG JUN and WANG JIN
in Bijie, Guizhou

Before the introduction of electric rice cookers, every family in Liangfeng village, Bijie, Guizhou province, cooked rice in small wooden buckets that imparted a fresh and sweet aftertaste.

By producing such buckets, Long Shengguo, a master of the traditional craft, guided the village to prosperity.

"Our factory has had a good start this year, winning a bulk order of about 3,000," said Long, the Party secretary of the village, which is in Bijie's Jinhaihu New Area. He's also in charge of the Liangfeng Muzeng Processing Factory.

Muzengzi, wooden buckets for steaming rice, were widely used in southern China in times gone by. They evolved from an ancient pottery container for cooking food.

When electric cookers replaced wooden ones, most carpenters capable of making the buckets found other work, but the traditional craft has been maintained in Liangfeng for hundreds of years.

Long became a carpenter in 1992 after he was injured in a traffic accident. Unable to go out for work, he learned how to make muzengzi. Like most local carpenters, he supported his family by peddling handmade wooden kitchenware on the streets until 2015, when he opened his own factory.

"It was entirely handwork before we brought in machines," Long said. "We had to climb up mountains and cut down trees to get timber that could only be processed into several products a day."

A previous muzengzi factory set up by the village folded due to poor management, which led Long to



Long Shengguo checks muzengzi, wooden buckets for steaming rice, at his factory in Liangfeng village, Bijie, Guizhou province.

WANG JIN / CHINA DAILY

propose that he manage the current one, which was built by village cooperatives.

To improve production efficiency, Long spent more than 200,000 yuan (\$31,400) on 12 machines to improve the quality of its products and reduce the need for labor.

In the plant, amid the scent of freshly cut cedar and the roar of machines, villagers were busy processing wood to fulfill New Year orders.

After over 20 procedures, including sawing, cutting, drilling, assembling and grinding, the body of a wooden rice bucket is finished, with the finishing touches being a steamer cover and a bottom made of woven bamboo.

Major procedures are now accomplished by machines, but some work is still better done by hand, creating jobs for villagers.

Among the plant's 15 regular workers, nine escaped poverty by becoming involved in carpentry. They can each earn more than 3,000 yuan a month.

Liu Wenxiang, a 30-year-old who has mastered every process, said he

could earn up to 400 yuan a day.

Long Kun, Long Shengguo's son, said the factory can produce 100 wooden bucket rice cookers a day.

"The wholesale unit price is 40 yuan, with demand often exceeding supply," he said. "Full-year net profit has reached 500,000 yuan, and if not for the epidemic, we would have promoted the products to North Korea and Southeast Asia."

Long Shengguo said there are seven muzengzi processing factories in Liangfeng that employ 40 people, including 15 who have climbed out of poverty, making the industry a promising one for the small village. Elderly residents have also benefited.

"I can make 10 bottoms a day and get a monthly income of more than 2,000 yuan," said 70-year-old Xia Qikun, who has been weaving bamboo since he was a child.

Chen Meiling contributed to this story.

Contact the writers at wangjin@chinadaily.com.cn

Researchers develop boneless carp variety

By ZHAO YIMENG
zhaoyimeng@chinadaily.com.cn

People eating a variety of carp will not have to worry about getting tiny bones stuck in their throats in future thanks for researchers at the Chinese Academy of Fishery Sciences' Heilongjiang Fishery Research Institute who have cultivated the world's first crucian carp lacking intermuscular fish bones.

Academicians, including teams of experts led by Gui Jianfang from Chinese Academy of Sciences and the CAFS' Chen Songlin, examined the new variety at the institute on Jan 14.

They validated the new variety, which was created by gene-editing techniques, Science and Technology Daily reported.

Crucian carp is a popular freshwater fish with tender meat and a fresh flavor, but its many tiny bones make it difficult to eat or process industrially.

It is a member of the cyprinid family, the most numerous of the vertebrate families.

A research team at the institute started a project to tackle the problem in 2009 and identified the key gene, from 1,600 candidate genes, to control the growth of the fish's intermuscular spine.

After a decade of research, the team created the mutant population of crucian carp through gene-editing techniques, with a heritable population of the new variety achieved last year.

The new variety grows well and is superficially indistinguishable from normal crucian carp.

The expert teams said its creation is a major breakthrough in improving the quality of carp varieties and will boost the consumption of aquatic products.

They urged biologists to continue conducting basic research and promote industrialization so that people will no longer have to pick out fish bones.

Another research team at Huazhong Agricultural University has found the key gene that controls the development of intermuscular fish bones in Wuchang bream, another species of cyprinid that is native to water bodies throughout the Yangtze River Basin, the university announced on its WeChat account late last month.

Professor Gao Xie, the leader of the research team at the university, said she decided to study the subject in 2012.

"Many people have swallowed fish bones and got them stuck in their throats, so I wanted to cultivate a thornless fish variety which can be a future trend for the fish industry," Gao said.

Her team found the first fish bone gene expression and obtained a patent.

They spent seven years using gene-editing techniques to test 50 gene candidates on zebra fish, a fast-growing cyprinid, by removing the genes one by one and observed the growth and changes in fish bones. Gao said the team found an effective gene able to reduce fish bones by 70 percent in 2018 but it was not the key gene that would ensure bream grew no intermuscular bones at all.

That was finally discovered in 2019, with hundreds of zebra fish and their offspring all proving to be thornless fish. The key gene is common to all fish with bones, she said.

After finding the key gene, researchers transplanted the gene into thornless fish to see if they would grow bones again, reaffirming the key gene's function.

The removal of the key gene has been tested on Wuchang bream, grass carp and crucian carp.

"I believe that the thornless domestic fish will lead to an upgrade of the freshwater fish industry and family diets," Gao said.