

Financial institutions step forward to save businesses



Increased lending to help companies facing pressure

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Financial institutions in North China's Shanxi province are taking steps to support local businesses in resuming operation by offering incentivized lending and facilitation measures, according to local media reports.

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus epidemic, businesses in Shanxi have faced difficulties due to a shortage of labor force, inadequate funding and lack of access to logistics.

In Pingyao, one of the counties hardest hit by the epidemic, local companies have been under great pressure — their operations are the latest to resume.

Pingyao Beef Group is one of the largest food companies in the county. Lei Bingyi, board chairman of the company, said its operations were put on hold for nearly a month.

"All the 1,000-or-so staff members were required to stay at home for quarantine or medical observation," Lei said.

"It's lucky that no confirmed or suspected cases have been reported among our employees," he added.

The company resumed operations on March 10 as the situation improved in Pingyao.



Employees at Pingyao Beef Group inspect products before they are delivered to markets. LIU JIAQIONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

While only half of the workers are back to work, Lei said the largest difficulty is that there is no cash flow in the company.

"Sales have decreased dramatically and we have to pay our employees even if they are still at home," said the executive.

Fortunately, the difficulty in funding is expected to be solved with the support of local financial institutions.

The Shanxi branch of the People's Bank of China — the financial regulator in Shanxi — released a proposal on Feb 7, requiring local financial institutions to offer preferential loans to key enterprises in the province. Lei's company is on the list of priority borrowers.

Pingyao Beef received a loan of 10 million yuan (\$1.43 million) from the Shanxi branch of China Construction Bank, with a preferential

interest rate of 3.15 percent.

The company later obtained loans from other local banks, with total lending hitting 140 million yuan, all at a rate of 3.15 percent.

Lei said with the support of the banks and a recovering market, the company's operations can get back to normal.

Companies engaged in the production of medicines and supplies for epidemic prevention and control have been prioritized by local financial institutions.

Datong-based Sinopharm Weiqida Pharmaceutical is a key enterprise producing medicines for the epidemic.

The company has obtained loans from several banks in Shanxi, with the lowest interest rate at 2 percent, far lower than standard market rate, according to Shi Guizhong, financial manager of the company.

The loan packages to the company totaled 180 million yuan, according to Shi.

The procedure for applying for lending has been greatly streamlined.

"It took only two days for the Shanxi branch of Agricultural Bank of China to approve a loan of 50 million yuan, after quickly examining our financial situation and qualification," Shi said.

The Shanxi branches of the Agricultural Development Bank of China and Postal Saving Bank of China have shifted their focuses to serve local small and medium-sized enterprises.

Tiantian Restaurant in Xiyang county is an SME in Shanxi under great pressure.

With no business for more than a month, the company needed to pay more than 200,000 yuan to its employees, according to Tian Yuli-an, general manager of Tiantian.

Adding to this difficulty, the restaurant must pay 80,000 yuan a month to the Xiyang branch of Postal Serving Bank of China as principal and interest.

Tian tried to report the difficult situation to the bank. To his surprise, the bank agreed to reduce the repayment amount to 36,000 yuan for six months.

The bank's staffers even helped the restaurant sell vegetables by posting sales information on WeChat.

Tian said the restaurant has sold more than 3 metric tons of vegetables with the help of the bank's staff members.

Zhang Zhen contributed to this story.



The last patient of the novel coronavirus in Shanxi is cured and discharged from hospital on March 13. ZHANG BAOMING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Province recovers fast with all patients cured

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The last patient of the novel coronavirus pneumonia in Shanxi was cured and discharged from the Hospital for Infectious Disease in Jinzhong city on March 13. It marked a great victory for the province in epidemic control, according to local media reports.

By that day, all 133 patients confirmed with the virus had been cured and released from hospitals in the province. No suspected cases have been reported since the end of February.

Local health officials said there were zero fatalities among the patients and no infections among medical workers.

With the waning of the epidemic in the province, Shanxi announced it would lower its emergency response from level two to level three on March 10.

Pingyao, the hardest-hit county in the province, was named a low-risk region on March 11. No confirmed cases had been reported there for 14 consecutive

days, according to the Shanxi Health Commission.

The commission said all 117 counties and districts in Shanxi are now low-risk regions.

Despite the remarkable progress made in epidemic prevention and control, health officials and experts advised locals to stay alert.

Residents are required to comply with local preventive measures, such as wearing face masks, reporting their health conditions and travel history to local community officials and having their body temperatures checked.

They are also advised to wash their hands frequently and ventilate their homes.

According to national and local regulations for the prevention and control of contagious diseases, those who traveled from overseas and the rest of the country should report to local public health authorities for medical observation or quarantine if necessary.

Li Yu contributed to this story.



A local agricultural service company uses its tractors to water a wheat field in Xicheng county. HU BO / FOR CHINA DAILY

More than 1 million hectares of woodland planted

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Spring is the ideal time to plant trees in Shanxi, as well as other parts of the country.

Forestry authorities in the province estimate that trees will be planted on an area measuring around 270,000 hectares this spring, according to local media reports.

Although March 12 is Tree-Planting Day in China, the tree-planting season in Shanxi can last from February to April, due to differences in latitude and altitude.

As usual, Shanxi's tree-planting campaign started from Yuncheng, the southernmost city in the province.

Senior city officials launched the provincial campaign by planting more than 300 trees in Cangfang village in Xiezhou township.

Students in Shanxi were taught online the history of the Chinese Tree-Planting Day and how the natural environment and people's lives can be changed by planting trees and grasses.

They learned that Shanxi had been suffering from environmental deterioration for several decades. This was a result of deforestation in the development of mining and agriculture.

They also learned that local residents are now making painstaking efforts to restore the environment. Tree planting is one of these important efforts.

A role model of the greening efforts in Shanxi province is Youyu county in Shuozhou city.

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the



Top: Farmers in Liulin county plant trees close to their farms. LI QIN / FOR CHINA DAILY Above: Thanks to constant cultivation, forest and grass coverage in Youyu county has increased from 0.3 percent in 1949 to 56 percent in 2019. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

county's forest coverage was only 0.3 percent.

For seven decades, Youyu's 20 Party secretaries have been engaged in a constant campaign to plant trees. As a result, the county's forest and grass coverage has now reached 56 percent.

This is more than double the average national rate of 22.96 percent.

It was not an easy job for Youyu to accomplish considering its tough natural environment, which features an average annual rainfall of 410 millimeters.

23.5 percent

the rate of forest coverage predicted for Shanxi province by the end of 2020

The situation is described in a local saying: "Growing a tree is even harder than raising a child."

"The people's determination in cultivating their homeland comes from their belief that trees can help shield them from the frequent, devastating sandstorms," said Li Yunsheng, boss of a local company that plants trees.

Li, 64, said that he began to plant trees with his parents and grandparents when he was a child.

He was the president of a drivers' training school 18 years ago and horticulture had been his main hobby. He said he was so "addicted to planting trees" that he resigned from the school and ran a tree-planting company.

Over 18 years, he invested a total of 6 million yuan (\$856,000) to plant 3 million trees on nearby hills and mountains.

According to the Shanxi Forestry and Grassland Bureau, the province planted 1.27 million hectares of trees between 2016-19, costing a total of 11.13 billion yuan. Provincial forest coverage reached 22.79 percent in 2018.

With further efforts in cultivating the land, the bureau predicts the province's forest coverage will reach 23.5 percent by the end of 2020.

Li Yali contributed to this story.

Famous Yanmen Pass welcomes back visitors

By YUAN SHENGGAO

With the waning of the novel coronavirus epidemic in Shanxi, Yanmen Pass, a renowned fortress of the Great Wall of China, reopened to tourists on March 1.

A family led by a mother named Cao were the first visitors to the scenic spot after Spring Festival, arriving at the gate at 10:35 am.

The attraction welcomed 14 tourists on that day.

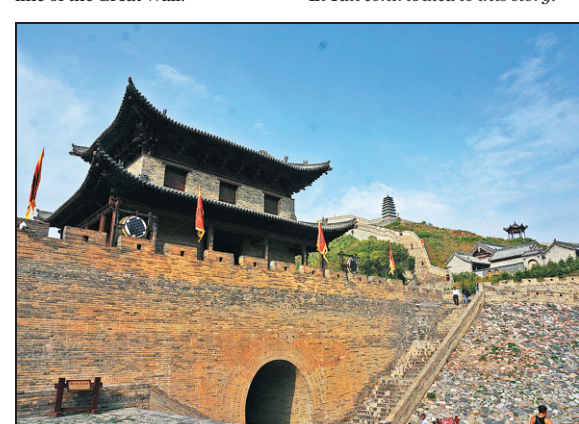
The site was closed on Jan 25 in response to the emergency of the novel coronavirus outbreak in the country.

According to a proposal released by the National Cultural Heritage Administration on Feb 27, the country's cultural and historical sites are to open gradually according to the risk level of their local regions.

Xinzhou, where Yanmen Pass is located, is a low-risk city as recognized by the Shanxi provincial government. The site opened to tourists on March 1.

"I'm glad to visit the Great Wall in lovely weather and with so few people," said Cao, who added she was satisfied with the preventative measures taken by the scenic spot.

Located in Daixian county of Xinzhou city, Yanmen Pass is an important pass through the inner line of the Great Wall.



Yanmen Pass in Daixian county is one of the most strategic fortresses along the Great Wall. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Situated at a place of strategic importance and difficult to get through, it was regarded as "the most important pass of the Nine Passes under Heaven" in ancient times. Many famous historical battles occurred in the area.

In the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), the original pass was built on the summit of a hill accessible only by an ancient trail, for defense against the northern nomads. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) it fell into disrepair. The current Yanmen Pass was rebuilt in 1374 during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Yanmen Pass is about 1 kilometer long and the height of the wall is about 4 meters. There are three gates in Yanmen Pass, with the central gate called Yanmen built over a tiny pass between two hills. Yanmen means "wild goose gate" in Mandarin Chinese, and is named so because wild geese are seen flying around the pass every year. The western gate is called Dili which means "to choose the proper location for a battle", and the eastern gate is called Tianxian which means "an impregnable fortress".

Yanmen Pass is about 20 km from Daixian's county seat and 180 km from Taiyuan, capital city of Shanxi province.

Li Yali contributed to this story.