

Shanxi's environment delivers the feel-good factor



Province's air and water quality registers a record improvement in 2022

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Pictures of blue skies dotted with white clouds, and rivers and lakes with clear waters were a hit on social media in the North China province of Shanxi on New Year's Day.

Guo Lilan, a resident of Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi, had a walk along Fenhe Park in the city that day. The park is part of a scenic belt along the Fenhe, the second-largest river in the province.

"To be bathed in the warm winter sunshine and to see the crystal-clear water in the river can always put people in a good mood," Guo said.

She added that these pleasant days are no more unusual as they were years ago. "But as the environment is improving, I can tell you this New Year's Day is the best in my memory and you can expect even better days in the future."

Guo's feeling was supported by the latest environmental data. The Shanxi Department of Ecology and Environment announced on Jan 2 that the province achieved breakthroughs in both air and water quality in 2022, with several indexes reporting their best in history.

For instance, it said the comprehensive air quality index was 4.49, improving 2.4 percent from 2021. The improvement rate was 31.7 percent over the past five years.



The Fenhe River runs through Taiyuan, Shanxi province, adding luster to the city's landscape. WANG JING / FOR CHINA DAILY

About 74.5 percent of the days in 2022 maintained good or excellent air quality, representing a 2.4 percent improvement from 2021.

The monitoring stations of Shanxi's surface water bodies showed that 86 percent of the monitored sections reached good or excellent level in 2022, increasing 13.7 percentage points from 2021 and 30.8 percentage points from 2017.

The remarkable improvements are a result of the concerted efforts of governments, businesses and residents, the department's officials said.

The provincial government of Shanxi released an action plan for improving the air quality over 2022-23, requiring local environmental protection departments in Taiyuan and another 30 counties and cities in its neighborhood to halt the approval of polluting industrial projects like coking facilities and conventional steelmaking furnaces.

Local businesses had implemented strict pollution control measures before this ban. Shanxi Guangda Coking and Gas Resources based in the county of Xiangfen, for instance, was the first coking enter-

prise in the country to release a corporate emission standard, which was stricter than the national standard, in 2020.

According to Wang Junliang, deputy general manager of Guangda, the company has installed multiple monitoring devices for the emission of polluting gases and volatile organic compounds.

"If emissions surpassed our standard, the monitoring system will report the emission data and the location to the operations center and a halt of operations at the location will follow," Wang said. "The

operation can resume only after the problems (that caused abnormal emissions) are identified and solved."

Taiyuan Iron and Steel Group is another example of a company reducing its waste gas, wastewater and solid waste discharges.

According to Shi Lairun, an executive responsible for environmental protection at the company, the discharge reductions are made possible with its wide-ranging recycling practices.

At the group's coal-fired power plant, for instance, the coal ash and

other solid waste are recycled to make bricks and other prefabricated construction components.

"Apart from solid waste recycling, we are also making the maximum use of other wastes," Shi said. "The exhaust gases are turned into fuel for power generation, the surplus heat is used at heating plants, and the wastewater is disposed to be reused in the production process."

The corporate efforts have led to decreases in almost all kinds of air pollutants, according to the Shanxi Department of Ecology and Environment.

Its statistics show that 2022 saw the concentration of PM2.5 — particulate matters with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less — decrease by 2.6 percent from 2021. Discharges of sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide also dropped by 20 percent and 6.7 percent respectively.

The Fenhe River is a prime example of Shanxi's efforts to improve water quality. The provincial department of ecology and environment's recently released data show that 57.1 percent of the river's water body reached good or excellent water quality level in 2022, growing 9.5 percentage points from 2021.

With sustained efforts in controlling pollution, repairing ecology and increasing water supply, the river's ecological system is expected to improve in the years to come, according to Wang Yanfeng, head of the department.

The official predicted that 80 percent of the river's water body could reach a Class III water quality standard by the end of the year. Class III refers to water that can be used for irrigation and aquaculture.

He also predicted that the entire river could reach Class III by the end of 2024 and surpass the standard by the end of 2025.

Wu Jia contributed to this story.

Govt support cheers small business owners

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the North China province of Shanxi has maintained remarkable economic vitality over the past three years, evidenced by the growing number of market entities.

The latest data released by the Shanxi Administration for Market Regulation show that the number of market entities in the province reached 3.98 million by the end of 2022, representing a 26.1 percent increase from 2021.

Local businesspeople said the enthusiasm for entrepreneurship and the confidence in the local economy are a result of support from the government and financial institutions.

Ren Feng is a deputy general manager of Jintian Real Estate Development based in the central Shanxi city of Jinzhong. On Jan 4, he took a business license and other permits to create a subsidiary company at a business registration

and approval center in the city.

"We registered the subsidiary to vie for a property development project, for which the bid will open in the near future," Ren said. "We didn't expect the approval process would be completed in three days. Everything is now in place, including a business license, a corporate seal and all kinds of permits."

The improved efficiency in business registration and approval is a result of Shanxi authorities' efforts to create a better business environment. Their efforts include transforming local governments into service-oriented organizations, streamlining administrative approval procedures and offering whole-process assistance for enterprises.

The market regulation administrations at various levels in Shanxi, for instance, are offering businesses, whether they are State-owned or privately run, all kinds of assistance for market access.

Since 2020, the administrations have focused their efforts on assist-



A machine operates at a new energy company in Changzhi, Shanxi province. WANG RUIRUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

ing small businesses because these entities are the most vulnerable to economic uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The administrations hold regular meetings with small and micro business owners to hear about their difficulties and their expectations. Through these meetings, the authorities learned that market exit is as important as market access.

"Canceling operations and quitting from the market in a timely manner can help struggling business owners avoid further losses," an official at the Shanxi Administration of Market Regulation explained.

For this purpose, the provincial administration has released new reg-

ulations on market exit, with simpler procedures for businesses to cancel their operations.

The market regulators have noticed small businesses have difficulties in applying for loans, so they have collaborated with local financial institutions to address this concern.

The provincial market regulation administration forged an alliance with the Shanxi branch of Postal Savings Bank of China in June 2020 to offer loans to small and micro businesses. They jointly launched a "10-billion-yuan lending program", promising to lend 10 billion yuan (\$1.48 billion) to small and micro businesses in the period from June 2020 to December 2021.

The program was later scheduled to continue, with 5 billion yuan of loans available in 2022. The total lending amount is expected to reach 24 billion yuan by the end of 2025.

Liu Jiaqi, a small hotspot restaurant owner in Taiyuan, is a beneficiary of the lending program. He recently borrowed 300,000 yuan from the bank.

He said the loan has relieved him from many concerns, so he is optimistic about his business in the future.

Meng Ting contributed to this story.

Nations celebrate historical liquor brand

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Guests celebrated the historical connection between Chinese liquor and Italy at a recent reception held in Milan by the Qingtian chamber of commerce to ring in the Chinese Lunar New Year.

Qingtian, a county in East China's Zhejiang province, is the hometown of 381,000 overseas Chinese, who have settled across 146 countries and regions, according to figures released by the East China Normal University in December. More than 100,000 Qingtian natives live in Italy.

Chinese and Italian officials, representatives of organizations for Chinese living in Italy and members of the Qingtian chamber of commerce in Italy were among the more than 500 guests who attended the reception.

A representative of Xinghuacun Fenjiu, a time-honored distiller based in North China's Shanxi province, shared with guests the historical connection between *fenjiu*, or traditional liquor made in Shanxi, and Italy. The story traces back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and the famed Italian explorer Marco Polo.

At the age of 17, Polo embarked on a journey to China with his father and uncle, arriving in Beijing — then called Dadu — in 1275. He recorded his experiences in his celebrated book, *Travels of Marco Polo*.

The book contains descriptions of *lujiu* — medicinal liquors mixed with edible animal and plant materials — such as *zhuyeqing*, and wine from Taiyuan, which is now the capital city of Shanxi province.

Wine made in Taiyuan had been made in tribute to the imperial

court. Many people in the city made a living by operating vineyards. Today, the suburbs of Taiyuan and the nearby Taigu district and Qingxu county remain key regions for grape production.

The techniques for brewing liquor varieties including *zhuyeqing*, which literally means bamboo-leaf green, were brought to Italy via Polo. The medicinal liquor quickly gained traction among Italians for being appetizing, healthy and helpful to improved digestion.

Today, in some food stores or health products stores in Rome, Paris and San Francisco, one can easily spot healthy liquors made from bamboo leaves.

Herb-based health products made in natural food markets and restaurants in the US city of Fort Lauderdale sell well. This herbal powder or liquid is put into *baijiu*, a type of Chinese alcohol, or fruit juice. It is believed that these herb-infused drinks can provide human cells with nutrients and increase vitality. For this reason, these drinks have come to be known as "smart foods".

With the efforts of Xinghuacun Fenjiu, *fenjiu* liquor and its history and culture have been gaining recognition around the world, according to a representative of the company. Since 2020, Xinghuacun Fenjiu created the cultural brand of "If our language is *fenjiu*". It is aimed at combining *fenjiu*'s history and culture with the pursuit of a better life. It also highlights *fenjiu*'s uniqueness as well as what it shares with other liquors from around the globe.

Zhao Qingyuan contributed to this story.

Technology harnessed to improve lives in countryside

By YUAN SHENGGAO

With a steadily growing rural economy and an improving environment, Shanxi province's countryside has become a better place to live in.

The farming sector is the mainstay of Shanxi's rural economy. It maintained an increasing rate on a par with or higher than the national average in recent years.

Statistics from the Shanxi Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs show that the province's grain output totaled 14.64 million metric tons in 2022, up 430,500 tons from 2021. The per-hectare output reached 4.64 tons, about 119 kilograms more than the figure in 2021. During the first three quarters of 2022, the added value of Shanxi's agricultural industry — which includes farming, forestry, animal husbandry and aquaculture — amounted to 92.47 billion yuan (\$13.65 billion).

The per capita disposable income of Shanxi's rural residents reached 11,471 yuan during the same period, growing 6.7 percent year-on-year. The increase was 0.3 percentage point higher than the national average.

Agricultural modernization driven by new technologies and innovations



Farmers drive combine harvesters across a field of wheat at a village in Yuncheng, Shanxi province. ZANG YANSHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

is one of the major contributors to the growth of Shanxi's rural economy.

Chen Yijun is the operator of a farming company based in the village of Danao, Shouyang county.

He was happy that he had a bumper harvest at his corn farm of 360 hectares. "The per-hectare corn output reached a record 17.28 tons," he said. "And per-hectare income was 48,375 yuan, which can translate to 17.42 million yuan for the entire farm."

Backing the growth of his opera-

tions are researchers from the Shanxi Agricultural University and other research institutions throughout the country. They are helping him cultivate new crop varieties with higher yields and higher quality, as well as developing new farming techniques.

Throughout Shanxi, the agricultural industry is being supported by research facilities and scientists.

In 2022, the Shanxi Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs launched a high-quality seedlings

cultivation program. As a part of the program, more than 100 researchers from Shanxi established a seedling cultivation base in the southernmost Chinese province of Hainan. There they developed varieties of higher quality and bigger profit potential.

Along with the growth in agriculture is the fundamental transformation of rural environment. One prime example showing the improvement in rural environment and living conditions is the promotion of flush toilets.

You Yinghua, a resident in the village of Dongzhuang in the county of Yushe, said she is happy to have a new flush toilet in her home. "We used to use old-style public toilets in the village, which were always dirty and smelly," You said. "Now with a flush toilet in my home, I just feel life is as comfortable as that of city dwellers."

The promotion of modern toilets is part of a rural infrastructure project launched by the Shanxi government in recent years. The renovation and construction of such toilets involve investments from both governments and residents.

Wang Xujuan contributed to this story.



Xinghuacun Fenjiu executives show their high-end product at a recent reception held in Milan, Italy, to ring in the Chinese Lunar New Year. WEN ZHAOYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY