

CHINA

Sawing for success



Farmers compete in a wood sawing contest during a rural sports event in Tongdao Dong autonomous county, Hunan province, on Saturday. Participants also competed in other contests such as firewood bundling and melon carrying at the event, which was held to inspire them to experience the joys of labor and appreciate the beauty of life. SU YONGZHU / FOR CHINA DAILY

NATIONAL VISION, LOCAL ACTION

Songyuan prospers with eco-restoration, ecotourism

City also actively explores its great potential in wind and solar energy

By LIU MINGTAI in Changchun and LI SHANGYI in Beijing

By successfully integrating ecological restoration and tourism development, Songyuan, a city in Northeast China's Jilin province, has achieved both a thriving environment and high-quality economic growth, according to Li Xiaojie, Party chief of the city.

"With Chagan Lake serving as a model, Songyuan has been making comprehensive strides in ecological protection and ecotourism," Li said in a recent exclusive interview with China Daily.

Located in the central and western parts of Jilin, Songyuan boasts diverse ecological resources, with Chagan Lake — the largest natural lake in Jilin — as its "crown jewel". The lake was recently recognized as a national 5A-level tourist attraction.

Chagan is renowned for preserving the traditional ice-fishing culture of northern China's ethnic groups. The unique practice involves placing a fishing net beneath the ice and using horses to operate a winch. The ancient tradition dates back to the Liao Dynasty (916-1125) and Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) and remains vibrant today.

Each year on Dec 28, Songyuan hosts its annual winter fishing-themed festival, which has been celebrated 22 times, and this year's festival will also take place on that date. The city has expanded its tour-



Tourists watch the opening ceremony of last year's winter fishing-themed festival at Chagan Lake in Songyuan on Dec 28. LIU JIANFENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Li Xiaojie

ism offerings, introduced new ventures in ice-and-snow tourism, and enhanced cultural and tourism consumption through its signature winter fishing festival.

Songyuan is ramping up efforts to protect the environment while striving to reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, Li noted.

Through initiatives such as vegetation restoration and water ecology rehabilitation, the city has restored a cumulative 5,333 hectares of forests, grasslands and wetlands in recent years. Additionally, over 10 million fish fry are released into the lake annually. The annual reduction of nitrogen in the area has reached 12.7 metric tons.

To support different functions of the scenic area, green transportation and clean energy projects have been promoted. A 21-kilometer

walkway now weaves through the area, and a natural gas station with a daily supply capacity of 90,000 cubic meters has been established. To combat pollution, two wastewater treatment centers and over 400 environmentally friendly garbage treatment facilities are in operation.

"The water is cleaner, the fish are fatter and the number of birds around the lake has grown significantly," Li said, reflecting on the changes.

Renowned for its abundant fish resources, Chagan Lake has seen its fish production rise from 3,000 tons to 5,000 tons. The number of bird species has also increased from 239 to 276, with 1.95 million birds inhabiting the area.

The synergy between ecological improvements and tourism has created a multiplier effect for the local economy. Over the past six years, Songyuan has hosted over 30 popular sports and cultural events, including the Chagan Lake Mara-

thon and the Wetland Triathlon International Elite Competition.

The clean water is a natural treasure and a source of livelihood for residents, Li said.

Over 30 percent of residents in nearby villages are now engaged in tourism and related industries. The annual per capita income in the area rose from 12,000 yuan (\$1,654) in 2017 to 30,000 yuan last year.

According to Li, Chagan Lake's integrated approach has driven the joint development of the ecological environment and the economy city-wide.

This year, Songyuan has received 16.45 million tourist visits, a 16.5 percent increase from last year, generating 25.4 billion yuan in revenue. Ecotourism has become a cornerstone of the city's economic growth, Li said.

The city has implemented ultra-low-emission transformations of coal-fired boilers, significantly improving air quality. This year, 90.9 percent of the days in Songyuan recorded good air quality.

As an essential clean energy hub in Jilin, Songyuan also has excellent potential for developing wind and solar power. The city's total installed wind and solar energy capacity is 38 million kilowatts, accounting for 33 percent of the province's total, Li added.

Songyuan has been advancing the integrated development of green electricity, hydrogen, the green chemical industry and equipment manufacturing, leveraging sustainable practices to drive economic growth.

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Yellow River protection efforts making progress

By HOU LIQIANG
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China has made significant strides in enhancing the ecological environment of the Yellow River Basin, according to Li Hongzhong, vice-chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee.

Reporting to the country's top legislature on Sunday, Li highlighted key achievements under the Yellow River Protection Law, which took effect on April 1, 2023, following its adoption in October 2022.

For the second consecutive year, the quality of the Yellow River's main course has met Grade II standards, the vice-chairman said. China uses a five-tier quality system for surface water, with Grade I being the highest.

Li also pointed to a significant increase in vegetation coverage in the basin, with 84.9 percent of the area showing positive trends. Over the past two decades, the basin's "green line" has shifted westward by about 300 kilometers.

In 2023, nine provincial-level regions along the Yellow River completed afforestation efforts covering 1.7 million hectares. Additionally, around 16,000 square kilometers of areas affected by water loss and soil erosion were treated.

Progress has also been made in pollution control, water conservation and energy transition. For example, in a campaign to address violations involving solid waste, nearly 118 million metric tons of trash were cleared from 4,084 locations.

Li noted that water consumption per unit of GDP and unit of industrial value added in the nine provincial regions of the basin decreased by 22.8 percent and 40.9 percent, respectively, from 2018 to 2023.

Thanks to ongoing efforts to promote the construction of

“The overall coordination mechanism for governance in the basin still needs improvement.”

Li Hongzhong, vice-chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee

wind and solar energy bases in the desertification-prone river's upper reaches, non-fossil energy generation in these areas now accounts for more than 48 percent of the total installed capacity.

Despite these advancements, Li acknowledged challenges remaining in further strengthening conservation efforts in the basin.

"The overall coordination mechanism for governance in the basin still needs improvement," he said, emphasizing the complexity of managing the Yellow River's upper and lower reaches, left and right banks, and main and tributary streams.

Li noted that while some inter-regional joint prevention and control projects have been signed, they lack effective coordination, leading to inadequate implementation. He also pointed to deficiencies in monitoring and information-sharing systems across the basin.

"Inconsistencies in basic monitoring data standards in certain regions are impeding collaborative information exchange," he stated.

To address these challenges, Li called for the rapid establishment of a comprehensive, intelligent information-sharing platform that spans various government levels throughout the basin.

Cochlear implants now significantly cheaper

By WANG XIAOYU
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China has significantly reduced the cost of cochlear implants through its first centralized procurement program, cutting prices from more than 200,000 yuan (\$27,400) to around 50,000 yuan, the National Healthcare Security Administration announced on Thursday.

Five domestic and international companies secured bids during a bulk-buying program held in Tianjin, with a procurement volume of 11,000 sets, according to a preliminary list from the administration. Each set includes a surgically implanted component and an external device.

Cochlear implants, widely considered the most effective treatment for severe hearing loss, work by directly stimulating auditory nerves, unlike traditional hearing aids that amplify sound. The devices are particularly beneficial for children with congenital hearing loss, potentially preventing speech disabilities and easing families' financial burdens.

The selected implants include standard models and advanced

designs compatible with MRI scans and feature user-friendly external components. Discounted products will be available starting March 3, China's National Hearing Day, the administration said.

China has an estimated 27.8 million people with hearing disabilities, but only about 50,000 cochlear implants are performed annually, with high costs deterring many families.

Currently, more than 10 provincial-level regions, including Shanghai and the provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, include cochlear implants in public health insurance coverage. The price reductions achieved through the procurement program paved the way for potential nationwide reimbursement, said Gao Xue, an official with the healthcare administration.

The procurement program also reduced prices for peripheral vascular stents, with 18 companies winning bids to supply 258,000 units. The stents, used to treat vascular diseases linked to diabetes, high cholesterol and other chronic conditions, will be available at reduced prices starting in May, officials said.

Chan draws Xi's inspiration in boosting global links

By LI XIAOYUN in Hong Kong
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Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will ramp up efforts to promote innovations in finance and technology, and strengthen its international profile and position as an important link between the Chinese mainland and overseas markets, Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po said on Sunday.

Writing in his weekly blog, Chan said he was inspired by President Xi Jinping's speech at a ceremony in Macao on Dec 20 celebrating the 25th anniversary of the city's return to the motherland, in which the

president said: "Hong Kong and Macao should be more open and inclusive, expand international linkages, and raise their global standing and appeal."

To ensure Hong Kong's long-standing advantages in finance, Chan said the special administrative region should drive more innovations across systems, products and cross-border collaboration.

He cited Stock Connect — a two-way trading link between the mainland and Hong Kong — which celebrated its 10th anniversary last month. As a policy innovation, the program has contributed net inflows of \$690 billion to both stock

markets, and has been the most important channel for external capital to invest in mainland markets.

The HKSAR government will further enhance the size and liquidity of the city's financial market by facilitating connections between the mainland and emerging markets, while solidifying its ties with established markets, Chan said.

"This would help Hong Kong better meet the financing needs of businesses amid (the complexities of) today's technological transformation and geopolitical landscape." Moreover, it would also fortify Hong Kong's financial strengths, and cement its status as

an international financial hub.

Hong Kong is one of the world's freest economies and among the top three international financial centers. Recent government data showed the SAR is home to 9,960 firms with parent companies located outside the city this year — an increase of more than 920, or 10 percent — from the previous year. These firms hired 493,000 employees — a five-percent rise year-on-year.

Chan said despite the challenges the country is facing, like growing protectionism and unilateralism, the central government's commitment to high-standard opening-up

remains unwavering. Hong Kong will follow suit, promoting more bilateral and multilateral exchanges, such as organizing more business visits and teaming up with the other 10 cities in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area for joint investment roadshows and promotions.

Each of the Greater Bay Area cities has its distinct advantages in innovation and technology — Hong Kong boasts a wealth of talent and capital, Shenzhen leads in technology research and application, while Foshan is strong in advanced manufacturing, Chan emphasized. "With joint efforts, we can promote development in a more holistic and efficient way," he said.

The Hetao Shenzhen-Hong Kong

Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone serves as an example of such cross-boundary collaboration. Last month, the HKSAR government announced development plans for a Hong Kong park of the cooperation zone, following the central government's unveiling of plans for a Shenzhen park in August 2023.

With breakthroughs and more proactive policy innovations, smoother and safer cross-boundary flows of people, goods, money and data will be achieved between the two parks, Chan said.

This is expected to boost research and development efficiency, and accelerate the advancement of strategic sectors like artificial intelligence and life sciences, the finance chief added.