

## \$0.00 water bills 'are necessary'

THE 300,000 bills the Hongkong Water Supplies Department sends every four months demanding "\$0.00" are necessary, it says.

Puzzled consumers have complained their "no cents" bills make no sense, but department business manager Frederick Yu defended the bills, posted to 18 per cent of domestic consumers at a cost of \$3 million.

The bills were automatically produced by the administration's computers and acted as a four-monthly tally of each household's water consumption, Yu said.

Hongkong households were allowed 14 cubic metres of water free of charge in each four-month period.

Consumers who used more than their free quota were charged according to a staggered scale of fees.

Each bill cost the department \$10 to produce, but most of the cost was in computer processing overheads, which remained constant whether or not the bill was sent out.

As a government department, Water Supplies paid no postage fees, leaving the post office to shoulder the cost of delivering more than a million "no cents" water bills a year.

Post Office management services controller Ellen Siu admitted delivering the bills was extra strain on the already cash-strapped service, but said it was "the practice of the Post Office not to charge other government departments for postage".

Friends of the Earth director Mei Ng said Hongkong consumers would be more careful with water if they had to pay for every drop.