

For discussion

8 May 2012

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

“Trap-Neuter-Release” Trial Programme for Stray Dogs

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the proposed “Trap-Neuter-Release” (TNR) trial programme for stray dogs.

Current Stray Dog Management Strategy

2. One of the core duties of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is to manage the stray dog population to prevent rabies outbreaks, reduce nuisance caused by animals, and safeguard public health and safety in Hong Kong.

3. Under AFCD’s stray dog management programme, AFCD will catch stray dogs in response to complaints of noise and environmental hygiene nuisances, potential danger to members of the public and dog biting incidents. In 2010 and 2011, there were 10 562 and 10 194 such complaints respectively. Stray dogs caught will be retained at AFCD’s Animal Management Centres (AMCs) for observation. During the observation period, duty veterinary surgeons will monitor the animals’ health and other conditions to assess their suitability for re-homing. For dogs licensed and implanted with a microchip, AFCD will search for the owner’s contact details and approach the owners to enable them to reclaim their animals. For dogs not microchipped or unclaimed by owners, they may be re-homed through animal welfare organisations (AWOs) if they are found to be healthy and of an acceptable temperament. Animals which are sick, assessed to be unsuitable for re-homing due to health or temperament reasons, or cannot be re-homed by AWOs would be euthanised.

4. We believe that the most effective way to reduce the stray dog population and its associated nuisance is to reduce stray dogs at source. In this connection, apart from the above-mentioned stray dog management programme, AFCD runs a continuous education and publicity programme to promote responsible pet ownership. It urges members of the public to refrain from the impulsive purchase of pet animals, and also to have a lifelong commitment to their pets by taking care of them properly, keeping them under proper control and not abandoning them. In order to reduce unwanted puppies, AFCD also encourages dog owners to neuter their dogs and has been providing free de-sexing services to dogs adopted through AWOs. AFCD has been educating the general public on these messages through various channels including production and dissemination of a comprehensive range of leaflets and posters, radio and television announcements, advertisement on public transportation, roadside bus shelters, magazines and websites, promotional events and exhibitions, as well public and school seminars.

5. Through AFCD's on-going efforts, the numbers of stray dogs caught and euthanised by AFCD have decreased by 34% and 43% respectively from 2008 to 2011. Notwithstanding this, there were still concerns regarding the catching and disposal methods of stray dogs and the number of dogs euthanised. Various AWOs have proposed that TNR as an additional method to control the stray dog population be explored.

The TNR Concept

6. Under TNR, stray dogs are caught, neutered and then returned to their original habitat. The neutering will reduce the number of sexually active dogs and, over time, will reduce the dog population due to their natural death. Proponents believe that, through TNR, the number of stray dog population will gradually decline without resorting to euthanasia. Besides, as neutered dogs are normally less aggressive, nuisance caused by dogs fighting for mating partners should also subside.

7. From available overseas experience and data, the effectiveness of TNR in reducing the stray dog population and its associated nuisance has yet to be scientifically proven. However, in a proactive spirit to tackle the problems posed by stray dogs and associated nuisance, AFCD has

agreed to assist two AWOs that have been advocating the TNR concept to carry out a trial programme in selected sites to assess its effectiveness in reducing the stray dog population and its associated nuisance. To this end, AFCD has been working closely with them in devising a protocol for the trial programme as well as conducting local consultation. The AWOs concerned will manage the trial programme and AFCD will take up the monitoring role and provide technical support when necessary.

The Proposed TNR Trial Programme

Implementation Details

8. The trial programme will study the effectiveness of TNR in reducing stray dog population within a designated area and its associated nuisance. Stray dogs in the designated area will be closely monitored and taken care of (including vaccination, neutering, feeding, etc) during the trial period. The number of stray dogs within the designated area before and after the trial period will be compared to assess the effectiveness of the trial programme. As the designated area will not be fully enclosed, stray dogs are free to move in and out of the area. The possible fluctuation of stray dog number due to these movements will be taken into account in the assessment of the trial programme. We propose that the trial programme should last for three years and will be run by the AWOs concerned, as the Programme Coordinators (PCs), under a set of agreed protocol. A broad framework of the trial programme is set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

The trial zone

9. The trial zone is the designated area described in paragraph 8 above. An appropriate trial zone should be one with an existing stable colony of stray dogs. To minimise the risk of rabies introduction, dog bites and traffic accidents caused by these stray dogs, the trial zone must not be located around hospitals, schools, homes for the elderly, busy roads or within 500 metres from the boundary with the Mainland. In addition, the selection of a trial zone would depend on whether the PCs can recruit sufficient carers who are familiar with the situation of the stray dog population in the trial zone.

10. As the population sample size will affect the statistical significance of the trial, the initial stray dog population in the trial zone should be of a reasonable size (at least 30 dogs). The initial population size will be assessed and confirmed jointly by the PCs and a consultant to be commissioned by AFCD.

11. Based on the above criteria, three areas in Ha Pak Nai in Yuen Long, Lo So Shing in Lamma Island and Ho Chung in Sai Kung have been proposed as the trial zones. Maps showing the exact locations of the proposed sites are at Annex. The map showing the exact boundary of the trial zone and the enquiry telephone number will be provided by the PCs on a notice board erected at conspicuous locations on the perimeter of the zone for public enquiry of the trial programme and report of missing dogs.

Carers

12. The PCs will recruit volunteers as carers to catch and feed stray dogs within the trial zone. The PCs will provide proper training to their carers on animal nutrition, animal behaviour, practical means to identify sick dogs, environmental safety, dog catching methods, necessary data collection and keeping before the carers join the trial programme. The carers will carry an identification card issued under the trial programme while engaging in any activities relating to the trial for better identification.

Catching of the dogs within the trial zone

13. The trial programme targets stray dogs in the trial zone, including feral and semi-feral dogs, irrespective of whether they are already in the trial zone at the start of the programme or move into the trial zone during the trial period. The PCs propose to catch the dogs by first developing a trusting relationship between the carers and the stray dogs through regular feeding. However, if the above feeding approach fails due to the feral nature of the dogs, the traditional catching method may also be employed by the PCs, including the use of catching poles and snares.

Screening and treatment of the dogs

14. Stray dogs caught by the PCs in the trial zone will be transported to their designated veterinary clinic for medical and temperament assessment as well as neutering. If the dog is found with a microchip, appears to be well-socialised or is suspected to have an owner, it will be held in the PCs' facilities or referred to the relevant AMC until ownership status is verified. If a dog is confirmed to be owned, it will be returned to its owner. Unowned dogs will be rehomed if they are healthy and of an appropriate temperament. The aggressive ones may endanger public safety and will be euthanised.

15. Those dogs selected to be kept in the trial programme will undergo a veterinary examination by a registered veterinary surgeon before they are released back to the trial zone. These dogs will be given prophylactic treatments against various parasites such as intestinal worms, heartworms, fleas and ticks. They will be neutered, microchipped and given anti-rabies vaccination and other vaccines for the control of parvovirus infection, canine distemper, hepatitis and leptospirosis. In addition to a microchip, a visual marker will also be put on the dog for easy identification after return to the trial zone.

16. It should be noted that the catching and neutering will be a continuous process in that new dogs, though of a small number, may enter the trial zone from outside. These, together with those already in the trial zone at the beginning of the trial but not yet caught and neutered may continue to have offspring. The PCs are therefore expected to continue with the catching and handling of these relevant dogs throughout the trial period.

Release at the trial zone

17. The carers will be responsible for the care, feeding and monitoring of the dogs under the trial programme. No excessive feeding by the carers will be allowed and they have to ensure that environmental hygiene of the location is not affected by their feeding activities.

18. An exemption notice under the Rabies Ordinance, Cap. 421 and the Dogs and Cats Ordinance, Cap. 167 will be gazetted to exempt staff and carers/volunteers of the PCs from the requirement to obtain dog

keeping licences for the dogs under the trial programme and to allow them to return these dogs (including those over 20kg) to the trial zone after neutering and treatment. Without this exemption, the trial programme could not be carried out. Personnel of the PCs will also be exempted from prosecution if a dog bites a person when the dog is in custody of the PCs for the purpose of the trial programme. Moreover, if for any purpose a dog under the trial programme is kept at an AFCD's AMC and the dog is subsequently allowed to return to the trial zone, the PC concerned will be allowed to remove the dog from the AMC without paying a detention fee.

Complaint Handling

19. During the trial period, any complaint of dog nuisance regardless of whether it is inside or outside the trial zone will continue to be handled by AFCD. AFCD will inform and involve the PCs in any investigation, mediation and remedial action regarding the complaints. Any dogs caught in the trial zone in response to complaints, irrespective of whether they have gone through the screening and treatment described in paragraph 15, will be returned to the PCs or held at the respective AMCs. The dogs concerned will only be released back to the trial zone if they are deemed to be suitable after a joint assessment by the PCs and AFCD.

20. Any dogs in the trial zone which are involved in biter cases will be removed from the trial programme. AFCD will then handle these dogs under the established procedures for handling stray dogs involved in biter cases.

Record Keeping

21. Record keeping is essential for assessing the effectiveness of the trial programme. All carers are requested to fill in records related to their feeding activities, dog catching activities and post-neuter monitoring. The PCs will keep a database of the population survey, including photos of all dogs found in the trial zone during the study period. The database will also comprise all veterinary examination reports, temperament assessment reports, microchip numbers, vaccination records, date of neutering and any medical treatment given to individual dogs during the trial period. Any dogs noted to be missing from the trial zone, found dead, being put under an adoption scheme or euthanised will also be

recorded. The PCs will provide reports to AFCD and the consultant for reference and analysis on a monthly basis.

22. Both AFCD and the PCs will maintain complete records of the complaints and enquiries lodged by local residents and other organisations, and of the dogs returned by AFCD after complaint investigations. The records will also contain follow-up actions taken in response to complaints and enquiries received.

Monitoring and Assessment

23. To ensure an independent assessment of the outcome of the trial programme, a consultant will be commissioned to conduct a baseline population survey in collaboration with the PCs before the commencement of the programme. AFCD will, along with the consultant, monitor the field work conducted and records compiled by the PCs in the trial zone during the three-year trial period. To this end, AFCD will hold regular meetings with the PCs to chart the progress of the trial programme and to resolve any issues that may arise during the trial period.

24. The consultant will analyse and submit regular reports on the data concerning the change in the number, distribution and ecology of stray dogs as well as the number of complaints received in the trial zone during the trial period and the correlation among them. It will also conduct a mid-term review and an overall assessment on the effectiveness of the trial programme upon its completion. As stated in paragraph 8, the goal of conducting the TNR trial programme is to assess its effectiveness in reducing the stray dog population and its associated nuisance. Therefore, the evaluation of the effectiveness of the trial programme will be carried out with reference to the targets set out below:

- (a) catching at least 80% of stray dogs in the trial zone during the first six months of the trial programme;
- (b) achieving an average 10% annual decrease in the population of stray dogs in the trial zone, which is set with reference to the previous data that there has been a 6%-12% annual reduction of stray dogs being caught in response to complaints in the past ten years in the whole of Hong Kong; and

- (c) at least matching with the territory-wide trend in complaint figures during the trial period.
25. For observation purposes, other quantitative and qualitative analyses will be carried out. These include aspects such as animal health and welfare of the dogs in the trial programme, number of animal rescues in the area, the dogs' reproductive rates and cost effectiveness, etc.
26. The sustainability of the trial programme will hinge on a number of factors, including the continued support of local residents, the potential nuisance and/or danger to the local public in the vicinity, and the successful prevention of dog abandonment by irresponsible owners in the area. These factors have been taken into account when devising the implementation protocol for the trial programme and selecting suitable sites for the trial with a view to ensuring the smooth running and sustainability of the programme. Furthermore, AFCD and the PCs will carry out suitable education and publicity activities in the vicinity of the trial zone prior to and during the implementation of the trial programme to provide local residents with a better understanding of the concept of the TNR trial programme. The activities will include distribution of leaflets and organising seminars. We believe that such activities will help gain wider community support for the trial programme and minimise complaints from the local residents.
27. It should be noted that even if the trial programme is successful, the result may not be applicable to other places in Hong Kong, especially areas with different dog population dynamics, high human population densities, busy traffic conditions, other public health and animal health and welfare concerns. Any future sites would have to be assessed individually for suitability if the programme is to be adopted and expanded.

Suspension / Termination of the Trial Programme

28. In order to safeguard public health and safety, the trial programme will be immediately terminated upon the confirmation of the emergence of a rabies outbreak or a zoonotic disease in Hong Kong during the trial period where transmission by stray dogs plays a role in

the disease epidemiology. The trial programme will be suspended if any of the following conditions arise:

- (i) significant increase in the number of complaints concerning animal nuisance and animal welfare in respect of the trial programme; or
- (ii) fatal or serious accident(s) caused by one or more dogs of the trial programme.

During the suspension period, AFCD and the PCs will work together to derive possible remedial actions. If it is not possible to come up with feasible solutions to prevent future occurrence of these incidents, the programme will be terminated.

29. AFCD may also require the PCs to suspend the trial programme if (i) there are procedural irregularities or non-compliance with the agreed protocol by the PCs; or (ii) the relevant District Council or local community groups have withdrawn their support to the trial programme, depending on the seriousness of the matter. During the suspension period, AFCD will make the best endeavour to work with the PCs and other parties to resolve issues. If mediation and remedial action fails, then the trial programme will be terminated. Upon termination of the TNR trial programme, the traditional catch-and-remove approach will resume in the trial zone concerned.

Local Consultation

30. Since December 2011, AFCD has been seeking the opinions of the local residents of the proposed sites on the trial programme. Questionnaires were sent to Village Committees, Mutual Aids Committees as well as Owners' Incorporations. In collaboration with the PCs, AFCD has also organised two consultation forums in early 2012 in each of the proposed sites to explain the operation of the trial programme and to further gauge the views of the nearby residents. In general, local views are diverse, with those opposed to the TNR trial programme pointing out the nuisance caused by stray dogs and supporters of TNR stressing the benefits of a trial programme. The residents living

near the trial zones tended to raise stronger objection to the programme.

31. In mid-May, AFCD will proceed to consult the three relevant District Councils (DCs) (i.e. Yuen Long, Islands, and Sai Kung) on the proposal to conduct the trial programme in their respective areas.

Way Forward

32. Subject to Members' views and comments, as well as the outcome of the DC consultation, we will finalise the protocol and make necessary preparation for the implementation of trial programme, including tabling the exemption notice as mentioned in paragraph 18 above at the Legislative Council for negative vetting as soon as possible. Provided there is support of the relevant DCs, the Administration will be able to roll out the trial programme in end 2012/early 2013.

Advice Sought

33. Members are requested to note and advise on the proposed TNR trial programme set out in this paper.

**Food and Health Bureau
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
May 2012**

Annex





