

**For discussion
on 9 May 2016**

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Subcommittee on Issues Relating to Animal Welfare and
Cruelty to Animals**

Government's efforts in management of stray animals

INTRODUCTION

This paper briefs Members of the Subcommittee on the policy and measures adopted by the Government on the management of stray animals.

POLICY ON STRAY ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

2. Our policy objective is to ensure that animals and people co-exist in a harmonious way in Hong Kong. In achieving this, we need to strike a balance between the well-being of people in Hong Kong on the one hand and the welfare of animals on the other. When safeguarding animal welfare, we are mindful of the fact that animals, especially stray ones, may be a source of nuisances to members of the public. In the past five years, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has received on average about 12 000 complaints each year concerning nuisances caused by stray animals. Such complaints are related to noise nuisance, environmental hygiene problems as well as public hygiene and safety. On receipt of complaints, AFCD will take appropriate follow-up actions to mitigate the nuisances and potential danger to the public.

3. Diseases that may be spread by animals to humans, including some that may lead to fatalities, is another risk of concern. One such obvious example is rabies. To eradicate the potential risk of rabies, the Government has developed an effective monitoring and control system which has been successful in keeping Hong Kong free of rabies over the past two decades.

4. For the management of stray animals, AFCD has put in place a series of measures in line with the recommendations of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). Our overall objective is to properly tackle the possible nuisances and public health problems caused by stray animals, with a view to effectively preventing the outbreak of animal transmitted diseases and safeguarding public hygiene and safety in Hong Kong.

MEASURES ON STRAY ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

Catch and Removal Approach

5. To address the nuisances caused by stray animals, AFCD adopts a catch and removal approach aimed at reducing the nuisances at source and controlling the population of stray animals. On receiving complaints against stray animals, AFCD will try to locate and catch the animals concerned, and put them in the Animal Management Centres (AMCs) for observation. For microchip-implanted animals, AMCs will try to locate their owners based on information on the microchips. In general, these animals will stay in AMCs temporarily for 10 to 20 days. Those without a microchip will stay in AMCs for at least four days, allowing time for their owners to reclaim them. Unclaimed animals that are in good health and assessed by a veterinary surgeon as having a gentle temperament and suitable for adoption will be transferred to animal welfare organisations (AWOs) for adoption by members of the public. Only animals that remain unclaimed or not adopted at the end of the process will be euthanised. A number of international animal organisations, including the OIE, agree that in situations where the number of stray dogs caught remain high or the dogs are not fit for adoption despite the deployment of various stray dog management measures, euthanasia would be an appropriate and humane solution¹. Besides, animals that are ill or injured also need to be euthanised to relieve them of their suffering.

¹ In 2007, the World Society for Protection of Animals and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals International published a report on the controlling method of stray cats and dogs in around 30 European countries. The report pointed out that these countries had to use euthanasia to handle animals with diseases and injuries, and to control the number of stray animals. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Japan and Singapore, etc. have also adopted euthanasia in handling stray animals. In fact, several internationally renowned animal welfare organisations support the use of euthanasia in handling stray animals. According to the Animal Health Code issued by the OIE (http://www.oie.int/index.php?id=169&L=0&htmfile=chapitre_aw_stray_dog.htm), when various stray dog management measures have been deployed, euthanasia of stray dogs caught should be an effective way of controlling their population.

6. Persistent application of the above-mentioned measures is bearing fruit in controlling the stray animal population. The number of stray dogs caught due to complaints has decreased from 5 800 in 2011 to 2 412 in 2015, i.e. a 58% drop. We will continue to implement and enhance the measures on this front to maximise effectiveness.

Strengthening public education on responsible pet ownership

7. Public education is an important part of our work in stray animal management. The OIE points out that the promotion of responsible pet ownership can significantly reduce the number of stray dogs and the incidence of zoonotic diseases.

8. To this end, AFCD has established a dedicated team to devise, implement and fortify public education and publicity programmes. Through these programmes, we disseminate messages appealing for responsible pet ownership including a solemn undertaking on the part of owners not to abandon their pets. We also emphasise the need to get their dogs licensed and vaccinated against rabies, as well as the benefits of neutering their dogs. In the past year, AFCD has launched a series of educational and publicity activities, including producing and broadcasting TV and radio Announcements in the Public Interest; advertising on public transport, magazines and websites; organising promotional events in shopping arcades; conducting regular village and community programmes; holding talks in schools; as well as conducting surveys on pet care. AFCD has also revamped its website to further promote the message of showing respect to and caring for animals, and provide information on how to take proper care of pets. With strengthened publicity and public education on various fronts, the numbers of dogs and cats given up by owners, caught and euthanised have been gradually reduced over the past few years.

Identification and registration of dogs

9. Under the current legislation, dogs aged over five months shall be licensed, microchipped and vaccinated against rabies. Apart from preventing and controlling the spread of rabies more effectively, the requirement may also help owners locate their dogs that have gone lost, thereby reducing the possibility of these dogs going astray. According to the survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department in 2011, around 82% of the dogs in Hong Kong were vaccinated and licensed. AFCD will continue to educate dog owners on the legislative

requirements through different means, highlighting the importance of getting their dogs vaccinated and licensed.

Enhancing re-homing and neutering services

10. Animal welfare policy must be in tandem with the values shared by the community in general. To achieve synergy, we need to have the support of the public, including AWOs. In this connection, AFCD has been working in close collaboration with various AWOs in promoting re-homing, neutering and proper management of animals, and providing re-homing services for animals. AFCD provides financial support to these AWOs, covering the cost of neutering service for animals re-homed, and for the establishment and improvement of animal re-homing centres which provide temporary shelters for stray animals awaiting re-homing. Currently, 15 AWOs are partnering with AFCD in this respect.

“Trap-Neuter-Return” Approach

11. In recent years, some AWOs advocate the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) approach as a means to gradually reduce the stray dog population. The advocates consider that TNR can slow down the continuous reproduction of stray dogs. They believe that the stray dog population will gradually decline over time in keeping with death by natural causes, and thus may be controlled without resorting to euthanasia. Moreover, as neutered dogs are generally less aggressive, the nuisances caused by dogs’ fighting may be reduced. Nevertheless, according to overseas experience and data available, whether TNR as a measure for reducing stray dog population and associated nuisances is able to achieve the effectiveness suggested by the advocates has yet to be verified scientifically.

12. AFCD is assisting the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and the Society for Abandoned Animals (SAA) in implementing a three-year TNR trial programme in designated zones, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of TNR as a means to reduce the stray dog population and associated nuisances. The trial programme was launched in January 2015. As the co-ordinators of the trial zones in Cheung Chau and Tai Tong, Yuen Long respectively, the SPCA and the SAA are implementing the trial programme according to the operational procedures agreed with AFCD.

13. AFCD has commissioned an independent consultant for the timely assessment of the effectiveness of the programme. AFCD will review the situation regularly during the three-year trial period and reflect on the experience upon completion of the programme. As the programme is still in the trial period, we are unable to evaluate its effectiveness conclusively at this stage.

14. Looking ahead, in considering whether the trial programme should continue to develop and expand to other districts, we would have to take into account relevant factors, including the support of local residents, the potential nuisances and/or danger to the public in the vicinity, and success or otherwise in preventing dog abandonment by irresponsible owners in the area. Even if the trial programme in the selected sites is successful, we wish to caution that the result may not necessarily be applicable to other places in Hong Kong, considering the possible differences that may exist in terms of dog population dynamics, human population densities, traffic conditions, public hygiene, as well as animal health and welfare concerns. If the programme is to be expanded to other areas, any such future sites would have to be assessed individually for suitability.

Management of stray cattle

15. The Government has also adopted a multi-pronged approach for managing stray cattle. We have been making continuous efforts to explore enhanced measures that will help minimise the nuisances caused by stray cattle while safeguarding their welfare.

16. One of the key measures is the “Capture-Sterilisation-Relocation” (CSR) programme. Since the implementation of the CSR programme in late 2011, AFCD has been taking action to capture and sterilise stray cattle mainly in Sai Kung and Lantau Island, and then relocate them to more remote locations.

17. Based on the data and information collected, the CSR programme has been found effective in preventing the cattle from moving back to the urban areas or roads. This has helped reduce the nuisances and risks of traffic accidents caused by them. AFCD will continue to identify suitable sites for the relocation of cattle, and engage stakeholders (including residents of the districts concerned and AWOs) with a view to exploring how the CSR programme could be strengthened in various districts.

18. In addition, AFCD has been studying the feasibility of sterilising cattle chemically with the use of a contraceptive drug named Gonacon. The study has been conducted in two phases. The first phase, involving testing of the drug in captive cattle, was completed in 2014. The results indicated that the drug yielded a success rate of approximately 70% in sterilising cattle. The second phase, which commenced in June 2015, is a field trial involving testing of the drug in free-roaming cattle and buffalo. It is expected to be completed this year. Should this prove to be feasible, it will enable us to sterilise cattle chemically without the need for surgical operation.

19. We will continue to liaise closely with the District Councils, rural committees, local communities of the districts concerned and AWOs to explore other possible measures, such as installing cattle grids to confine stray cattle to a particular location or to prevent them from roaming into a certain area, with a view to minimising the nuisances caused by stray cattle.

ADVICE SOUGHT

20. Members are invited to note the content of this paper, and offer comments on the policy and measures adopted by the Government on the management of stray animals.

**Food and Health Bureau
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