

**For discussion  
on 16 April 2019**

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Handling Illegal Importation of Cats and Dogs**

**Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the Government's handling of illegal importation of cats and dogs.

**Public health risks associated with illegal importation of cats and dogs**

2. The Government endeavours to prevent spreading of zoonotic diseases, including rabies which can be fatal, in the community. The virus can enter the human body through wound from biting or scratching by a rabid animal, and travel through nerves to the brain, resulting in encephalitis. Most human rabies cases are caused by transmission from rabid dogs, though cats and other mammals could also be means of transmission. The incubation period of the disease can be up to one year, and once exhibiting clinical signs, most infected persons will die. According to the World Health Organization, rabies is present in more than 150 countries and places, and it is estimated that tens of thousands of people die from rabies every year. The Government has been implementing a stringent mechanism to prevent and control rabies, with proven results over the years. Since the 1980s, Hong Kong no longer has any reported case of rabies in human or animal.

**Importation of cats and dogs**

3. For the protection of public and animal health, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) regulates the importation of cats and dogs from other places by imposing a permit system according to the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A), with a view to preventing the transmission of animal diseases, including rabies, into Hong Kong. Prior to the importation of a cat / dog, an owner or his / her representative is required to apply to AFCD for a special permit and comply with all the terms, including microchipping and vaccinating the animal, and obtaining an animal health

certificate, etc. All the required documents must be presented to AFCD officers upon arrival of the animal.

4. AFCD classifies the export places of cats and dogs into three groups in accordance with their risk of rabies. Group I includes rabies-free countries / places (i.e. where rabies has been absent for a long time); Group II includes countries / places where rabies cases are few and the disease is under effective control; and Group III includes countries / places where rabies cases are reported and the disease is not under effective control. In general, countries / places which do not meet the requirements of Group I or II (or their situations cannot be determined) will be included in Group III.

5. AFCD takes into consideration the information about the surveillance and control of animal diseases provided by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and other relevant factors, when determining the above classification. Since the risk of rabies of Groups I and II countries / places is considered lower, cats and dogs imported therefrom are exempt from quarantine, provided that the relevant requirements (e.g. vaccinated, with valid supporting documents) are fulfilled. Since the risk of rabies is higher or uncertain in Group III countries / places, cats and dogs imported from these countries / places are required to be kept in quarantine for at least 120 days.

6. Regarding the illegal importation of cats and dogs, if AFCD could confirm the owner or representative, depending on the inclination of the owner or representative, and the risk of rabies of the country / place of origin, the animals concerned may be repatriated, or stay in Hong Kong after completing the necessary quarantine procedures as assessed and required by AFCD's veterinary officer, including the provision of health certification, vaccination and isolation etc. However, if a cat or dog is illegally imported from a country / place of high risk of rabies and is not accompanied by records or information on health conditions, its risk of rabies infection is regarded as extremely high. Furthermore, given its long incubation period, rabies cannot be diagnosed in an infected animal during the incubation period. Coupled with the fact that there is no effective test to rule out rabies infection in a live animal, it is not practical to isolate the cat / dog for an observation period to rule out any possibility of infection. As such, an animal with no keeper or surrendered by its keeper is euthanised in accordance with Section 6 of the Rabies Ordinance (Cap. 421) to safeguard public and animal health. Some overseas places will also consider euthanising illegally imported cats / dogs to safeguard their animal and public health.

## **Handling of a dog from an unknown source found on a cargo ship from Thailand**

7. AFCD received a request for assistance from a shipping company on 11 and 12 March 2019 to help and receive a dog of an unknown source found on its cargo ship, which departed from Laem Chabang, Thailand for Hong Kong. That company believed that the dog was a stray animal, and could not provide information on the dog's health condition or vaccination record. The captain of the ship signed a declaration form surrendering the illegally imported dog and passed it to AFCD staff. The dog concerned without a permit issued by AFCD was regarded as illegally imported.

8. After receiving the dog on 12 March, AFCD's veterinary officer thoroughly examined the dog and did not find any microchip implanted. Since Thailand is a Group III country and there was no supporting document or medical record, the dog's risk of spreading rabies was considered extremely high. The veterinary officer euthanised the dog according to established procedures as described in paragraph 6 above. AFCD had not received any enquiry or report related to any alleged owner of the dog prior to the euthanasia.

9. The representative of the alleged keeper in Thailand of the dog had thereafter contacted AFCD and presented an authorisation document signed by the alleged keeper for handling the dog carcass to AFCD on 16 March. On the same day, AFCD staff accompanied the authorised representative to transfer the dog carcass to an animal crematorium and the dog carcass was cremated on 24 March as arranged by the authorised representative.

## **Next steps**

10. The above is an unprecedented case with no specified importer, different from illegal animal import cases handled by AFCD in the past. While AFCD will endeavour to safeguard public health and prevent and control rabies, having regard to the public's views on the handling of this case, AFCD will review the procedures and optimise the arrangements for handling special cases that are different from general cases of illegal animal importation.

11. Factors to be considered include –

- (i) the identification of the animal's country / place of origin and whether there is disease outbreak therein;
- (ii) whether the animal concerned has any keeper;
- (iii) whether the animal concerned is a lost or stray animal;
- (iv) whether the animal concerned has shown any clinical signs indicating infection of rabies or any other zoonotic diseases; and
- (v) the risk of spreading transmissible diseases of the animal concerned etc.

If the animal concerned has a keeper, his / her inclination and the feasibility of repatriating the animal will also be considered. The general handling arrangements adopted by other countries or places will be referenced, and legal and expert advice will be sought. We will complete the review as soon as possible.

### **Advice sought**

12. Members are invited to note the Government's handling of illegal importation of cats and dogs.

**Food and Health Bureau  
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department  
April 2019**