

(Translation)

Ms. Josephine SO
Clerk to Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Legislative Council Complex
1 Legislative Council Road
Central
Hong Kong
(Attention Ms. Josephine SO)

20 March 2019

Dear Ms. SO,

**Handling of a Dog from an Unknown Source Found on a Cargo Ship
from Thailand**

The Government's consolidated responses to the enquiries about the captioned subject from three members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene are as follows:

The Government endeavours to prevent the spreading of zoonotic diseases, including rabies, in the community. Rabies is a fatal disease with a long incubation period that can last for up to a year. Once exhibiting clinical signs, most infected persons will die from this disease. 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. In view of this, 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.

In accordance with the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Ordinance (Cap. 139) and the Rabies Ordinance (Cap. 421), the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) regulates the import of animals from other places by imposing a permit system and attaching import conditions, with a view to preventing the transmission of animal diseases and rabies into Hong Kong.

To safeguard animal health and public hygiene as well as safety, AFCD classifies countries / places of different risk of rabies into three groups, each with different quarantine requirements. The risk of rabies is lower for Group I and II countries / places, and extremely high for Group III ones. Before a cat or a dog from a Group III country / place arrives in Hong Kong, its owner or representative of the owner is required to submit its vaccination record, obtain a special permit and fulfill all the import requirements, and apply to AFCD for a quarantine facility. Upon arrival in Hong Kong, valid health document of the cat / dog must also be presented. Staff of AFCD will then take the animal to a specified quarantine centre for quarantine for a period of at least 120 days.

A cat or a dog illegally imported from a country / place of high risk of rabies and without any past records or information on health conditions is regarded as having an extremely high risk of rabies infection. Given its long incubation period, rabies cannot be diagnosed in an infected animal during the incubation period. Coupled with the fact that there is a lack of effective test to rule out rabies infection in a live animal, it is not practical to isolate such an animal 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.

As for the subject case, AFCD received a request for assistance from a shipping company on 11 and 12 March to help and receive a dog of an unknown source found on its cargo ship, which departed from Laem Chabang, Thailand for Hong Kong. The company concerned 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.

After receiving the dog on 12 March from the shipping company, AFCD's veterinary officer thoroughly examined the dog and did not find any microchip on it. Since Thailand is a Group III country and there was no supporting document or medical record, the dog's risk of contracting rabies was considered extremely high. Having considered factors including public health and safety, the veterinary officer euthanised the dog according to established procedures.

The representative of the alleged keeper of the dog prior to the incident had thereafter contacted AFCD. On 16 March, the representative presented to AFCD an authorisation document signed by the alleged keeper for handling the dog carcass. On the same day, AFCD staff accompanied the authorised representative to transfer the dog carcass to a hospice organisation, and is following up with the authorised representative on the cremation arrangement for the dog.

This is an unprecedented and unique 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.

Yours sincerely,

(Bill WONG)
for Secretary for Food and Health