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Welfare of companion animals in Europe: views and perspectives

Introduction

Since its first issue three years ago the animal welfare newsletter has evolved into a more focused publication. From now on, each issue will be devoted to a single topic and cover it in greater depth. This first issue in the new format explores the multiple aspects of cat and dog welfare within the EU, including matters of responsible ownership, registration, breeding and the policy framework. The new approach to our newsletter is designed to bring you sharper coverage of the developments in animal welfare across the EU with contributions from experts and main stakeholders in this area.

The EU explores options to define a policy framework on dog and cat welfare

The companion animal population in the EU has grown in the last decade, as EU citizens have increasingly taken dogs and cats into their homes. Today there are more than one hundred million dogs and cats across the European Union. They are wonderful companions as they provide significant psychological and physiological benefits to owners and help create social bridges in our communities. In addition to their social importance, the breeding and trade of dogs and cats represents a significant sector of economic activity.

EU competence on animal welfare is limited by treaty. It is not, as such, an EU objective and is only relevant if it affects EU policies such as the internal market, agriculture or public health.

Dog and cat trade is currently regulated by EU animal and public health rules but no specific EU legislation addressing welfare related issues exists and their protection remains under the responsibility of Member States. In parallel, existing national and EU rules applicable to dogs and cats are not necessarily properly implemented.

As a matter of fact, although many professional breeders and traders are constantly seeking to improve the quality of their practices, the standards for dog and cat welfare still vary across the EU and these differences may lead to uneven breeding and marketing costs. This might also increase the risk of animal welfare problems and zoonotic hazards and to mislead citizens by condoning the sale of animals carrying hidden diseases. Moreover, if puppies and kittens are illegally traded and transported between Member States or imported from third countries there is a threat to human and animal health.

For several years now NGOs, EU citizens and members of the European Parliament have called for companion animals to be protected at EU level. An evaluation conducted on the EU policy on animal welfare concluded that the welfare of pets stood to gain from harmonised laws. In 2010, the Council urged the Commission to promote education on responsible dog and cat ownership. More recently, the European Parliament has pressed for an EU legal framework to protect pets and stray animals.

In the meantime the Commission has focused its work on preparing an overall EU strategy for animal welfare adopted in 2012. In this context, a study on the welfare of dogs and cats involved in commercial practices is foreseen for 2014. It will consider to what extent this issue is relevant in the context of EU objectives and what kind of EU action would be necessary to achieve them.

In order to widen its insight, the Commission and the Lithuanian Presidency are organising the first European Conference on **"The welfare of dogs and cats"** in Brussels on 28 October 2013. The event will promote the welfare of companion animals within the EU and abroad.

Dr Paolo Dalla Villa, a policy officer to the animal welfare Unit in the **European Commission** dealing with issues related to the development and implementation of EU Policy on animal welfare (www.ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/index_en.htm).

Responsible ownership: what it means to care

Providing companion animals with housing, feeding and vaccination is a good start but responsible pet ownership should include animal health care and social interaction, according to the Expert Advisory Group on "Sociology and Welfare" of the VII Framework Programme research project CALLISTO. Owners should also have a duty to minimise the risks that their pet may pose to the public or to other animals.

Owning a companion animal entails responsibilities, and also has implications for society that are too important to be ignored. With an estimated 60 million dogs and 64 million cats in the EU, responsible ownership has become an issue of undeniable scale. Estimates vary as to how many of these animals roam homeless but it's generally believed to be millions. Not only should the number of stray animals be controlled, but animal protection should also be promoted as a matter of responsible ownership. Traceability (through identification and registration), birth control, preventive veterinary medicine, knowledge and training are all key components of any definition of responsible ownership.

Since 2010, a new tool is assisting these efforts. CAROdog (www.carodog.eu) is a European web-based platform launched by Vier Pforten International and Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell'Abruzzo e del Molise. The site, which is supported by the European Commission and the European Federation of Veterinarians, offers advice on legal matters, scientific research and training to promote responsible dog ownership. Following its success, CAROcat (www.carocat.eu) has been launched this year to improve understanding of responsible ownership of feline companions.

Dr Marlene Wartenberg, Director of the European Policy Office of Vier Pforten; the international animal welfare organisation based in Vienna, which has been working for the wellbeing and protection of animals all over the globe since 1988 (www.vier-pforten.eu).

Dr Barbara Alessandrini, Head of the International Centre for Veterinary Training and Information in the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell'Abruzzo e del Molise, Teramo, Italy (www.izs.it/IZS/).



Dog tags: pet ID and registration at national and EU level

In Belgium, the identification and registration of dogs became mandatory in 1998 following high numbers of lost pets and a growing need to monitor the dog trade. Since 2003, the European pet passport has also provided authorities with legal proof of dog registrations – a powerful tool in monitoring both trade and animal welfare.

By registering passport numbers and placing restrictions on the replacement of foreign documents, Belgian authorities have kept track not only of the number of dogs coming into the country, but also of their origin and their mortality rate in the early stages of their life. By comparing this information with statistics from Belgian-bred dogs, legislators have benefited from solid grounds on which to base animal welfare rules for dog-breeding facilities abroad.

This approach of identifying and registering dogs has many advantages. It simplifies investigations into illegal dog trade, as registrations of foreign passports can be cross-checked with information on the Traces database. When the passports are registered without corresponding Traces messages, contacting the new dog owners can quickly reveal the identity of an illegal trader. In the event of health or welfare issues, the origin of the dog and the whereabouts of its litter-mates can be quickly detected. Also, the implementation of mandatory registration has more than doubled the number of cases in which owners have been reunited with their lost dog.

Dr Eric Van Tilburgh, Head of the Animal Welfare Division of the Federal Services of Public Health with responsibility for animal welfare policy in Belgium in the field of farm animals, laboratory animals and exotic animals. He was a member of the Standing Committee of the Council of Europe's Convention for the protection of Animals kept for farming purposes (www.health.belgium.be/eportal).

Familiarity breeds contempt: Abusive practices in the EU dog and cat trade

The wide variation in standards across the EU has serious implications for animal welfare. For instance, studies have shown that puppies bred in non-household environments are more likely to develop fear-related behaviour problems.

Likewise, adult breeding dogs from commercial breeding establishments have reportedly shown abnormally high rates of health and behaviour problems. The rules of pedigree dog and cat registration also result in a lack of genetic diversity which increases the risk of inherited disorders such as cancer and blindness, or other extremely painful afflictions. Many breeding patterns designed to emphasise physical features – such as short, flat faces or wrinkled skin – lead to features so extreme as to cause suffering or predispose to health disorders. When puppies and kittens are sold across borders,

animal health can be put at risk if effective measures are not taken to prevent disease transfer. The on-line sale of animals can raise concerns among owners who do not know where and how their new pet has been bred. The issue of traceability could be addressed by compulsory identification and registration of dogs and cats on an EU database. The welfare of dogs and cats could be further protected by additional EU legislation on licensing breeders and traders, and by discouraging the breeding of inherited disorders.

Claire Calder, Policy Officer in **Eurogroup for Animals**, the federation representing 40 leading animal welfare organizations of the EU and providing a voice for the billions of animals kept in laboratories, farms and homes or living in the wild (www.eurogroupforanimals.org).

Interview

Interview with **Dr Simon Orr**, the President of the Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Association (FECAVA),

the platform promoting the professional development of companion animal veterinarians in Europe. Through its Member Associations 37 European countries are representing in FECAVA 30,000 veterinarians in Europe (www.fecava.org/).

What are the most relevant welfare problems for dogs and cats in the EU?

Breeding for certain characteristics has promoted the development of hereditary diseases, which in some breeds have grown so pronounced that, even if breeders were willing to address the problem, it would by now prove very difficult to breed them out.

How much do EU citizens know about legislation dealing with keeping, breeding and trading dogs and cats?

We suspect that, in general, the level of knowledge on current legislation is very poor indeed and, in some countries, non-existent. Generally, prospective dog and cat owners do not consider legislation when acquiring a new pet.

What kind of information on the welfare of dogs and cats might be useful at the moment of acquiring a pet?

The biggest problem is that prospective owners don't consider animal welfare before acquiring a pet. They receive information from the breeder, but it is of variable quality. Most of the time, the pet owner only gets the right information too late. The big issue is how to reach people who intend to buy a pet before they get to a "puppy farm" or a breeder. Once they have met a dog, few citizens will change their mind on buying it in the light of information received. By that point, emotions tend to take over from reason.



To which extent would EU citizens value information against the risks of contracting zoonotic diseases, being defrauded or deceived?

One would expect them to value such information highly but that is not what owners are thinking about when they set out to acquire a pet. The issue is unfortunately more often a matter of trying to help them with a problem after it has occurred. With regard to zoonotic diseases, it is important to balance the need for information on such diseases with the benefits of pet ownership. This is an important aspect of the ongoing Callisto project (www.callistoproject.eu).

What can the EU do to improve the welfare of dogs and cats?

Cross-border legislation is needed to address issues related to stray dog control and trade practices that fall short of animal welfare standards. One step in the right direction has been the launch of the CAROdog website (www.carodog.eu). The project aims to reduce the number of stray animals, as well as abusive trade and breeding practices, by informing owners. The companion website, www.carocat.eu, also promotes care for cats.

The welfare of companion animals

Keeping a companion animal means taking on ownership for it. This involves accepting responsibility for its health and well-being – two concepts which are closely interconnected. Poor health affects the well-being of an animal, just as compromised well-being will harm its health. On the other hand, good health is not enough to ensure proper welfare.

A good start to ensuring the welfare of an animal is to respect its five fundamental freedoms: freedom from hunger, from discomfort or disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from distress. But there is more to animal welfare than this. It is necessary to also consider less obvious sources of harm, such as breeding practices that result in genetic disorders, puppy farms, or the long-distance transport of prematurely weaned puppies. How can one factor in the distress to pets resulting from inappropriately aggressive dogs, or neighbourhoods overpopulated with cats?

The Federation of Veterinarians of Europe has a keen interest in companion animals. We are coordinating the FP7 project CALLISTO (www.callistoproject.eu) on the role of companion animals in the transmission of infectious diseases. We recently

published a poster to advise companion-animal owners on the responsible use of antibiotics (<http://www.fve.org/news/index.php?id=82>). FVE also wishes to play its role in improving the welfare of companion animals. Together with animal owners, stakeholder organisations, scientists and regulators, we search for solutions to the challenges facing animal welfare today, because animals deserve it, and veterinarians care about them.

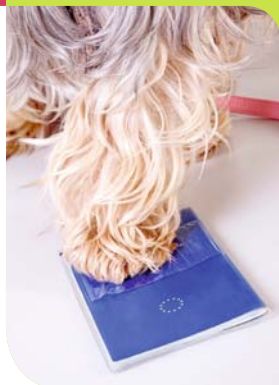
Dr Jan Vaarten, Executive Director of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE), an organisation founded in 1975, representing today 46 national veterinary organizations across 38 European countries which strive to promote animal health, animal welfare and public health across Europe (www.fve.org).



When taking your animal on holiday do not forget to take its passport!

Until few years ago, if you wanted to take your companion animal with you when travelling to another EU country, you needed a different document for each EU country visited to prove that the animal met the necessary veterinary conditions. In 2004, all this paperwork was replaced by one single document: the EU Pet passport. It contains all the necessary information about your animal's identity and health status (e.g. vaccinations, anti-parasite treatment). The EU Pet passport is recognized by all EU

countries. To get one, simply go to your vet, who will first verify that your animal is micro chipped and then, if necessary, vaccinate it against rabies. The passport is now mandatory for dogs, cats and ferrets being moved to another EU country. Remember to take it while travelling with your companion animal on holiday.



Conference on “The welfare of dogs and cats: Building a Europe that cares for companion animals”, Brussels

The Welfare of Dogs and Cats conference organised by the European Commission and the Lithuanian Presidency with the support of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) will take place in **Brussels on 28th October, 2013**. It is the first of its kind, and will bring together stakeholders from government, veterinary and inspections authorities, breeders and NGOs to help promote companion-animal welfare within the EU and abroad. It will provide an unprecedented opportunity to share views on how to tackle issues of pet welfare, public health and consumer protection stemming from the commercial breeding and trade of dogs and cats.

The presentations at the conference will be organised around three major themes:

1. Legislation on companion animals in Europe
2. Breeding and trade of companion animals: business as usual?
3. Building a Europe that cares for companion animals: tools and perspectives

The conference will also see the launch of a study into the welfare of dogs and cats involved in commercial practices. Based on the outcome of the study and this conference's proceedings, the Commission will consider what further action is necessary in order to improve animal welfare and to increase transparency and adequacy of information to consumers.

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Directorate General for Health and Consumers
European Commission – B-1049 Brussels

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