

AFCD' statement on handling of animals tested positive for COVID-19 virus

â€œIn response to public concerns about handling of animals tested positive for COVID-19 virus given the amendments of the Prevention and Control of Disease Regulation (Cap. 599A), a spokesman for the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) today (April 18) issued the following statement.

Adopting compulsory isolation and quarantine measures in respect of infected persons and their close contacts, as well as timely handling of possibly contaminated articles is key to containing the spread of COVID-19 in the community and providing early support to and treatment of cases. Pursuant to the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599) and Prevention and Control of Disease Regulation (Cap. 599A) (the Regulation), if a health officer has reason to believe that an article (including an animal) is, or may have been, infected with a specified infectious disease, the health officer may order a disease control measure to be carried out in respect of the article or destroy the article. The Government has amended the Regulation recently, including stipulating that the owner of the article concerned (including animal) shall hand over the article according to the instructions of the health officer, and providing for offences for non-compliance with the concerned instructions and introducing relevant penalties. In view of the latest epidemiology and volatile epidemiological situation, the Government needs to implement effective public health prevention and control measures to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.

As far as COVID-19 is concerned, except for a small number of animal species (for example minks and hamsters), there is currently no evidence showing that infected animals (for example cats and dogs) would transmit the virus to humans. Hence, the chance of humans being infected with COVID-19 through animals is very low. In these circumstances, it is expected that the chance where the power need to be invoked to request the owner concerned to hand over his pet is not high. However, if there is sufficient scientific evidence showing that there are animals spreading the virus to humans like the case where hamsters spread the virus to humans earlier this year, then the Department of Health and AFCD will prudently consider exercising such power to handle the concerned animals to stop the spread of the virus.

In the case where the pet owner of a mammal is a confirmed COVID-19 patient or a close contact and needs to be hospitalised or isolated in any quarantine facilities and no evidence has been found that the infected animal concerned will spread the COVID-19 virus to humans, the AFCD will adopt the measure that has been in use, i.e. after obtaining the owner's consent, the animal concerned would be sent to the New Territories South Animal Management Centre for isolation and veterinary surveillance. AFCD staff will take care of the animal and make special arrangements for the animal concerned taking into consideration its health condition during the time. Samples will also be taken from the animal for COVID-19 virus testing according to its conditions.

Arrangement to return the animal to its owner will be made upon negative testing results and satisfactory results in veterinary surveillance.

Apart from handing the animals to AFCD, pet owners can also ask their relatives or friends to help taking care of their animals.