

## LCQ15: Combating the smuggling of cats and dogs

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Dennis Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

It has been reported that in recent years, some pet shops have been selling purportedly locally bred cats and dogs which were in fact smuggled into Hong Kong from the Mainland. Many Mainland pet shops have even openly claimed that they can transport cats and dogs to Hong Kong on the same day, meaning that they are able to circumvent the relevant import quarantine requirements. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the number of applications approved by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department for the import of cats and dogs, as well as the number of cats and dogs involved, in each of the past three years;
- (2) of the number of smuggled cats and dogs seized by the Customs and Excise Department, as well as the number of cases involved, in each of the past three years;
- (3) whether it has considered taking the initiative to investigate the sale of smuggled cats and dogs on social platforms through decoy operations;
- (4) as there are views pointing out that the existing stringent quarantine requirement for imported cats and dogs (i.e. a quarantine period of no less than 120 days) is one of the main causes of rampant smuggling of cats and dogs, and the Government indicated in reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council on February 21 this year that it was conducting a risk review to explore the feasibility of shortening the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from certain places in the relevant group (including the Mainland) by measures such as rabies vaccination and rabies antibody titer testing, of the expected timing for the completion of such work; and
- (5) given that there have been cases of cat and dog flesh being sold as food in Hong Kong in recent years, whether it has investigated if the cat and dog flesh in question involves smuggling?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question from Dr the Hon Dennis Lam, after consulting the Security Bureau, is as follows:

(1) To safeguard public and animal health, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) regulates the import of cats and dogs from other places through a permit system, pursuant to the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A). The number of permits issued by the AFCD for import of cats and dogs and number of cats and dogs involved in the past three years are tabulated as follows:

Year	Number of permits for import of cats and dogs	Number of cats and dogs involved
2021	1 795	3 813
2022	1 729	3 747
2023	2 847	5 062

(2) In the past three years, the number of cases of illegally imported cats and dogs seized by the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) and the AFCD, and number of cats and dogs involved are tabulated as follows:

Year	Number of cases	Number of cats and dogs involved
2021	9	101
2022	2	200
2023	13	32

(3) To combat the sale of smuggled cats and dogs on social media platforms, the AFCD has a dedicated investigation team, responsible for monitoring online advertisements related to animal trading and breeding, and handling relevant complaints. The investigation team would proactively investigate suspected cases and depending on the circumstances, adopt suitable enforcement strategies, including conducting "decoy operations". The AFCD also closely liaises with the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China to exchange intelligence.

Furthermore, the C&ED and the HKPF have all along been adopting proactive risk management and intelligence-based enforcement strategies, and mounting effective anti-smuggling operations in a timely manner. They will strengthen intelligence exchange and co-operation with local, the Mainland and overseas law enforcement counterparts, and conduct targeted investigation and joint enforcement actions to fiercely combat smuggling activities.

(4) Rabies is a contagious disease that can be fatal for mammals (including humans). Nearly 60 000 people die of rabies globally every year. To safeguard public health, the AFCD must adopt appropriate measures to prevent the introduction of animal diseases such as rabies into Hong Kong.

The AFCD classifies places into three groups according to different risks of rabies, with reference to information about animal disease surveillance from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Group I includes rabies-free places (i.e. where rabies has been absent for a long time); Group II includes places where rabies cases are few and under effective control; and Group III includes places where rabies cases are reported and not under effective control, as well as places with unknown risks of rabies. Since cats and dogs imported from Group III places may entail higher risks, they currently must be quarantined for at least 120 days.

The AFCD has kept in view WOAH's announcements on latest developments in animal diseases (including rabies) and refined the quarantine requirements concerned when necessary. As biotechnology has developed in recent years, the AFCD is exploring the feasibility of shortening the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from some Group III places (including the Mainland), through measures such as rabies vaccination and rabies antibody titer testing etc. The review is expected to be completed soon and our target is to roll out the new arrangements within this year.

(5) The Government does not tolerate the illegal use of cat and dog flesh for food and will thoroughly investigate suspected cases, including whether smuggling activities are involved. Furthermore, the AFCD, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and C&ED have all along closely collaborated at various control points, including conducting joint operations and exchanging intelligence etc. If suspected cat or dog flesh is discovered, the case would be referred to the AFCD to be strictly followed up.