

## LCQ6: Quarantine period for pet cats/dogs entering Hong Kong from Mainland

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Johnny Ng and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (October 23):

Question:

It is learnt that in recent years, more members of the public exit or enter the territory carrying pet cats/dogs. On the other hand, for the sake of preventing the spread of rabies into Hong Kong, pet cats/dogs carried by members of the public back to Hong Kong from Group III places (including the Mainland) as specified by the Government are required to comply with the quarantine procedures prescribed by law, including a quarantine period of at least 120 days. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of cases applying for quarantine of pet cats/dogs entering the territory that were received by the Government in each month of the past three years; among these cases, the respective numbers of cats and dogs which had fallen sick and died during the quarantine period and the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will increase the number of quarantine institutions and quarantine centres as well as the number of animals that can be quarantined, so as to meet the immigration needs of pet cats/dogs; if so, of the plans and timetable; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as information shows that some advanced regions in Asia adopt more lenient quarantine requirements on pets entering the territory than Hong Kong, such as the seven-day and 30-day quarantine periods adopted respectively by Taiwan and Singapore, whether the Government will make reference to the practice of those regions and shorten the present quarantine period for pet cats/dogs brought into the territory from Group III places; if so, of the specific arrangements and the earliest possible date of implementation; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Rabies is a contagious disease that can cause fatality to mammals (including humans). No specific treatment is available at present and rabies is almost always fatal once clinical signs appear, and nearly 60 000 people die of rabies globally every year. To safeguard public health, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) currently regulates the import of live animals through a permit system, and controls the import

of cats and dogs under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A), aiming to prevent the transmission of animal diseases including rabies into Hong Kong. Under effective control measures, Hong Kong has long been widely recognised as a rabies-free place; therefore, animals of Hong Kong residents generally face less stringent quarantine requirements when entering other places, for example places with strictest quarantine requirements like Australia and New Zealand permit the entry of cats and dogs from Hong Kong.

For importation of cats and dogs, the AFCD classifies places into three groups according to different risk of rabies, with reference to information about the surveillance of animal diseases from the World Organisation for Animal Health. 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. In general, places that do not meet the requirements of Group I or II (or their situations cannot be determined) will be included in Group III.

Since Groups I and II places are considered of lower risk of rabies, cats and dogs imported from these places are exempted from quarantine upon fulfilling relevant requirements (such as providing Animal Health Certificate, Residence Certificate, Anti-rabies Vaccination Certificate, etc.). For Group III places, the risk of rabies is higher or uncertain. Since the incubation period of rabies can be up to several months, to prevent the transmission of rabies into Hong Kong, the AFCD requires a quarantine period of no less than 120 days for the cats and dogs imported from Group III places.

On the questions raised by Dr the Hon Johnny Ng, I would like to reply to the question as follows:

(1) The AFCD will immediately arrange to send cats and dogs imported from Group III places upon arrival in Hong Kong to its Animal Management Centre for quarantine. If an animal falls ill during quarantine, the AFCD will inform the animal owner to take the animal to a vet clinic under the escort of the AFCD, or arrange a vet to the quarantine centre for treatment. If an animal shows an urgent health problem and the AFCD is unable to contact the animal owner, the AFCD will arrange for the pet to be examined by a vet as soon as possible. Over the past three years, a total of three animals (including two cats and one dog) passed away during quarantine, due to their own severe health issues such as kidney failure. In the past three years, the number of applications received by the AFCD for reserving a quarantine space for importing cats and dogs, the number of cats and dogs which received veterinary treatment during the quarantine period, and the number of cats and dogs deceased during the quarantine period are at the Annex.

(2) and (3) The AFCD is actively adopting a two-pronged approach to facilitate animal owners from Group III places in bringing their pet cats and dogs to Hong Kong. On the one hand, the AFCD is increasing the number of quarantine facilities; on the other hand, the AFCD is exploring ways to refine the quarantine requirements for cats and dogs.

Regarding quarantine facilities, two Animal Management Centres (i.e. Kowloon Animal Management Centre and Hong Kong Animal Management Centre) operated by the AFCD provide quarantine services for cats and dogs imported from Group III places. The two centres provide a total of 20 spaces for cats and dogs respectively. The Kowloon Animal Management Centre is currently undergoing works by the AFCD to increase the number of quarantine facilities, with the works expected to be completed in the first half of next year. Upon completion, the total number of quarantine facilities for cats and dogs in the two centres will increase to 34 and 30 respectively. To further increase the number of facilities, the AFCD is actively exploring the feasibility of operating and providing some of the cats and dogs quarantine facility by the private sector. Organisations are required to obtain a licence from the AFCD to operate a quarantine centre under the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A), and the relevant quarantine facility is a designated project under the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance (Cap. 499) which requires obtaining an environmental permit. The Government is now discussing with the private sector about the relevant arrangements and is providing assistance, and is striving to implement a pilot scheme in the first half of next year.

For the refinement of quarantine requirements for cats and dogs from Group III places, different places conduct their own risk assessments and establish import requirements based on their acceptable level of risk. The risk of rabies transmission is influenced by various factors, including the number of imported cats and dogs, whether the importing places can take effective control measures to prevent the introduction of rabies, the rabies immunisation status of the importing places, the rabies situation of neighbouring places, etc. As biotechnology has developed in recent years, the AFCD has earlier conducted a risk assessment, and considered that the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from some Group III places (including the Mainland and Macao) could be shortened by measures such as rabies vaccination and rabies antibody titer testing. The AFCD is discussing the proposed arrangements with the places concerned to finalise the implementation details. The AFCD will announce the details of the arrangements once the discussion is completed. With the gradual implementation of the revised measures, the waiting time of quarantine facilities would decrease, thereby further facilitating animal owners from Group III places in bringing their pet cats and dogs to Hong Kong.