

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

It was estimated in 2012 that in the European Union there were 60.8 million dogs and 66.5 million cats, a total of over 125 million animals and increasing annually. The keeping, breeding and trade of these animals represent a major economic activity with the annual value of cat and dog sales in the EU estimated at 1.3 billion euro and generating direct employment of 300,000 people. Pet food and care account for 22 billion euro and a further 2.1 billion euro on pet health products.

For the proper functioning of the internal market, the treaties of the EU ensure the free movement of goods, people and animals. A wide range of legislation has been developed over the years to safeguard health and security whilst enabling freedom of movement. There is however only one item of EU legislation which directly targets the welfare of dogs and cats and this relates to their transport for commercial reasons. Animal welfare standards for keeping and breeding remain the sole responsibility of Member States and national legislation on animal welfare varies between them.

In recognition of this, in 2010 the Council of the European Union considered that such "differences may lead to unequal breeding and marketing costs which could create animal welfare problems, zoonotic risks and deception of the citizens due to the purchase of animals carrying hidden diseases, including genetic defects and/or with irreversible behavioural problems".

As a result of these growing concerns, both the Council and the European Parliament urged the Commission to study the situation and investigate policy options for improvement. In consequence this study was authorised, the purpose of which was to determine to what extent initiatives would be necessary to achieve key EU objectives such as improved functioning of the internal market, protection of the consumer, public health, animal health and welfare. The Commission further underlined its commitment by introducing an annex to Regulation (EU) No 576/2013¹.

The methodology adopted by the study involved the collection of socio-economic, technical and legal data from published sources. In addition, the opinions of the main stakeholders concerned were collected by means of individually tailored questionnaires. Twelve Member States were chosen as a representative sample in accordance with the findings of the Eurostat report (2012) stating that 85% of the estimated total dog and 87% of the total estimated cat population in the EU are located there.

¹ Regulation (EU) No 576/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 June 2013 on the non-commercial movement of pet animals and repealing Regulation (EC) No 998/2003, OJ L 178, 28.06.2013, p. 1-26

Main findings

The study identified five main areas of concern which could potentially place at risk the welfare and the health of dogs and cats.

Breeding

National laws on animal welfare directed at dogs and cats are implemented in the majority of the Member States. These however are not equally stringent and there is concern regarding the variable level of compliance. In addition, the system of registration and licensing of breeders and dealers is also considered inconsistent. For example, only one Member State registers hobby breeders. This is a potential source of risk to the health of not only the animals but also the public.

Transport

European legislation has been developed to minimise the stress suffered by animals during transport. Whilst all Member States adhere to the rules and a small number have introduced additional protection the level of implementation is variable. The systematic identification, registration and control of the movement of animals would facilitate the collection of data and ensure a more transparent market.

Lack of knowledge and information for the keeping of pets

When purchasing an animal, consumers can be woefully lacking in knowledge about the level of responsibility they are about to undertake and are unaware of the costs, often significant, of keeping an animal. Indeed, less than 20% of purchasers reported being well informed about animal welfare and health at the moment of purchase. Appropriate information on the health and welfare of animals and on consumer rights could be helpful at the time of purchase.

Discrepancies in market data of pets

It is estimated that every month around 46,000 dogs are traded between EU Member States. This compares starkly with the registrations in the Commission's TRACES system which in one year (2014) registered a total of 20,779 dogs and 2,287 cats involved in intra-EU trade. The considerable difference between these figures is a matter of concern as the health risks to both animals and humans are considered significant. These concerns have been fuelled by the rapid rise of internet trading where the chain of purchase and delivery of pets cannot easily be traced.

Consumer protection

Under EU legislation dogs and cats are considered 'goods'. Following a purchase consumers are granted a period of 6 months during which complaints of defects can be raised. Many individuals and organisations consider this inappropriate since genetic disorders would not necessarily become apparent within such a time-scale.

Two concerns are common to all of the issues raised: first the proper enforcement of the legislation and second that an exchange of knowledge between Member States would be of considerable benefit. Such could include science-based animal welfare indicators to facilitate welfare assessment and best practices covering a wide variety of subjects. This would help improve the enforcement of legislation and the general approach to the health and welfare of animals.

Documents such as self-assessment tools, checklists and guidelines for all EU citizens would encourage consumers to provide better animal care and foster responsible ownership.