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To:	Delegations
Subject:	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the welfare of dogs and cats and their traceability - European Economic and Social Committee's Opinion

Delegations will find attached the Opinion¹ of the European Economic and Social Committee concerning the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the welfare of dogs and cats and their traceability.

¹ This opinion is also available in other language versions on EESC's website:
<https://dmsearch.eesc.europa.eu/search/opinion>



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Regulation on the welfare of dogs and cats and their traceability

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the welfare of
dogs and cats and their traceability

COM(2023) 769 final – 2023/0447 (COD)

NAT/922

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Referral	European Parliament, 25/1/2024 Council, 1/2/2024
Legal basis	Articles 43(2), 114 and 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment
Adopted in section	26/2/2024
Adopted at plenary	21/3/2024
Plenary session No	586
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	168/2/7

1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC is very pleased with the measures taken by the EU to promote the welfare and traceability of dogs and cats. Analysis of the regulation proposed by the Commission shows that this problem is complex and multifaceted. While the introduction of uniform standards and requirements at EU level is a step in the right direction, it will be crucial to balance the benefits with the challenges. Cooperation between Member States, stakeholders and NGOs will be essential to effectively achieve the objectives of the proposal and ensure long-term positive changes in the welfare of companion animals in Europe.
- 1.2 The Committee points out that developing identification and registration systems is key to improving the welfare of dogs and cats, as it makes it easier to trace animals' origin and health history. The introduction of uniform requirements in this area in each country will help fight the illegal trade and help improve monitoring of animal movements between EU countries. In the EESC's view, different identification methods should be considered, including microchips and pet passports, which will ensure easy access to information about the animal and its health status.
- 1.3 The EESC points out that this regulation has a significant impact on the pet market, as it will potentially increase costs for breeders and dealers, who will have to adapt to the new requirements. The European Commission should make every effort to ensure that these additional costs are seen as an investment in greater animal safety and welfare and consumer protection.
- 1.4 The regulation should increase transparency and certainty for consumers regarding the origin and health status of purchased animals and should help increase confidence in the pet market.
- 1.5 The unregulated trade in dogs and cats leads to numerous problems, including issues relating to animal welfare, human health risks and ensuring competitiveness in the EU's internal market. The proposed regulation must aim to limit the illegal trade by introducing strict requirements for breeders and dealers, including requirements for licensing, registration and compliance with specific welfare standards, including mandatory neutering, which is the only durable solution for curbing the phenomenon of stray pets. In addition, improving transparency and tracing the origin of animals must aim to protect consumers from unintentionally purchasing animals from illegal sources. The EESC calls for minimum rules on penalties for infringement of the regulation.
- 1.6 When implementing the new legislation, the Committee recommends that particular attention be paid to support and education for breeders and dealers to help them adapt to the new requirements.
- 1.7 The EESC points out the need to strengthen international cooperation on the exchange of information, best practices and joint operations to combat the illegal trade in animals. The involvement of INTERPOL, NGOs and social networks will be crucial here.

1.8 Furthermore, the EESC underlines that it will be crucial to ensure adequate resources for identification and registration systems so that they are effective and accessible to all stakeholders.

1.9 The EESC welcomes the proposal, which aims to ensure that all dogs and cats in the EU enjoy a high level of welfare and are properly identified and registered, making it easier to trace them and prevent the illegal trade and phenomena such as smuggling. In the EESC's view, this initiative also reflects the need to protect consumers against the risks associated with purchasing animals from illegal sources, as they may be ill or poorly treated.

2. Context

2.1 Over the years, public concerns about the ethical treatment of animals have increased. Animal welfare has been a subject of political interest for decades². Livestock welfare legislation includes a very strict framework for welfare on the farm and during transport and slaughter³, and is often based on evidence gained through research⁴.

2.2 However, in the case of cats and dogs, regulatory developments around the world are slower, both in terms of topics covered and specific features. In regions such as the United States and the State of New South Wales in Australia, legislation sets minimum requirements for keeping and handling dogs and cats on a daily basis. In fact, in most cases, legislation falls somewhere between general anti-cruelty provisions and animal welfare⁵.

2.3 In Europe, legislation focuses exclusively on transport and veterinary controls, which means that all other aspects of the welfare of companion animals have so far been monitored by national regulatory systems that vary from one country to another.

2.4 Cats and dogs play a significant role in people's daily lives and are seen as family members, providing not only companionship but also a source of feelings and emotional attachment⁶. Dogs have expanded their role from companions to helping as guides for people with disabilities and assisting them⁷.

² Bayvel, A.D., Cross, N., *Animal welfare: a complex domestic and international public policy issue—who are the key players?* Journal of Veterinary Medical Education, (2010) 37:3–12. doi: 10.3138/jvme.37.1.3 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20378871/>.

³ Caporale, V., Alessandrini, B., Dalla Villa, P., Del Papa, S., *Global perspectives on animal welfare: Europe*. Scientific and Technical Review, (2005) 24:567–77. doi: 10.20506/rst.24.2.1594 <https://doc.woah.org/dyn/portal/index.xhtml?page=alo&aloId=30460>.

⁴ Grandin, T., *Special report: maintenance of good animal welfare standards in beef slaughter plants by use of auditing programs*, Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, (2005) 226:370–3. doi: 10.2460/javma.2005.226.370 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15702685/>.

⁵ Andersen, S.S., Meyer, I., Forkman, B., Nielsen, S.S., Sandøe, P., *Regulating companion dog welfare: a comparative study of legal frameworks in western countries*, Animals (2021) 11:1660. doi: 10.3390/ani11061660 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34199669/>.

⁶ Albert, A., Bulcroft, K., *Pets, families, and the life course*, Journal of Marriage and Family (1988) 50:543. doi: 10.2307/352019 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/352019?origin=crossref>.

⁷ Rodriguez, K.E., Greer, J., Yacilla, J.K., Beck, A.M., O'Haire, M.E., *The effects of assistance dogs on psychosocial health and wellbeing: a systematic literature review*, PLOS One (2020) 15:e0243302. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0243302 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0243302>.

- 2.5 Because animals play an important role in providing companionship, people's changing lifestyles and requirements can be detrimental to their welfare⁸. It seems easy to assume that pets are treated with respect as companion animals and that their 'proper welfare' is guaranteed, but there is little evidence to back this up. Indeed, despite this assumption, there are still serious concerns about the welfare of companion animals⁹.
- 2.6 The European Union has long been committed to improving animal welfare, which is reflected in numerous regulations and initiatives. In the context of growing public awareness of the living conditions of dogs and cats and the increasing number of these animals being kept as pets in Europe, the proposal on their welfare, traceability and trade aims to harmonise and strengthen the existing legal framework.

3. Comments

- 3.1 One of the biggest problems affecting the welfare of dogs and cats is overcrowding and the strain on animal shelters, largely due to animals being abandoned and lack of neutering practices. In the USA in 2019, more than 3.5 million animals were taken into shelters (including both dogs and cats). There are currently no official data on the number of dogs and cats in shelters in Europe, but it is estimated that there are around 100 million abandoned pets in total, including not only those in shelters, but also homeless dogs and cats.
- 3.2 Stray dogs pose a serious problem in several areas of Southern and Eastern Europe and a serious threat to public health, increasing the risk of aggression against humans and livestock and transmission of rabies. The only sustainable approach to decreasing the number of stray dogs is the introduction or, as the case may be, the enforcement of mandatory neutering policies for animals in shelters and for non-purebred animals with identifiable owners.
- 3.3 A major area of concern for animal welfare is the breeding of dog and cat breeds with a brachycephalic (shortened, flattened) head structure, which also raises ethical questions due to related health problems.
- 3.4 In recent years, there has been an alarming increase in pet obesity, mainly due to limited access to exercise and over-consumption of food, resulting in serious health problems. A significant number of dog owners wrongly believe that being overweight is ideal for their animals. On the other hand, some pet owners are interested in feeding animals plant-based diets, but vegetarian and vegan diets are not recommended for cats. Finally, humans sometimes anthropomorphise animals, attribute characteristics, emotions or intentions to them, and the EESC believes that this attitude could also jeopardise the welfare of companion animals.
- 3.5 In the EESC's view, the development of integrated identification systems should help to implement uniform technologies and procedures for the identification and registration of dogs

⁸ Sonntag, Q., Overall, K., *Key determinants of dog and cat welfare: behaviour, breeding and household lifestyle*, Scientific and Technical Review (2014) 33:213–20. doi: 10.20506/rst.33.1.2270 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25000794/>.

⁹ Ascione, F.R., Shapiro, K., *People and animals, kindness and cruelty: research directions and policy implications*, Journal of Social Issues (2009) 65:569–87. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2009.01614.x <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2009.01614.x>.

and cats in the European Union. The EESC points out that such systems should aim to make it easier to trace animals' origins, their medical history and owners, which is key to improving animal welfare, combating illegal trade and making breeders and sellers more responsible. Integrated identification systems should also support the exchange of data between Member States and thus facilitate cross-border cooperation on animal protection. Implementing such systems requires cooperation at different levels of government as well as the involvement of stakeholders, including NGOs and the private sector.

- 3.6 The EESC points out that the standardisation of welfare requirements should aim to ensure uniform and high standards of animal care across the European Union. This will require the European Commission and Member States to draw up detailed rules that define minimum living conditions, nutrition, veterinary care, including provisions for neutering, and protection against disease and abuse. The implementation of such standards is intended not only to improve animals' quality of life, but also to promote responsible breeding and trade and reduce the spread of diseases.
- 3.7 The EESC points to the need to develop financial and advisory support programmes for small-scale breeders in order to enable them to adapt to the new rules without jeopardising their activities. These programmes should include grants, tax breaks and access to training and educational resources.
- 3.8 The EESC points out that NGOs can play a key role in promoting and implementing changes in protecting the welfare of dogs and cats, as the document suggests. Their actions may include: conducting educational campaigns, supporting research and development on best animal care practices, working together with government bodies in law-making and enforcement and helping to develop animal identification and registration systems. The need for NGOs to be involved in international actions aimed at combating the illegal trade in animals and in promoting global cooperation should also be pointed out.
- 3.9 It is essential to make digital sales platforms more accountable, to put in place rules and oversight mechanisms that oblige these platforms to verify the identity of sellers, the origin of the animals being sold and compliance with existing national legislation on animal welfare, such as neutering legislation. Platforms should also ensure that sales notices comply with statutory animal welfare and traceability requirements. Platforms could be required to remove illegal notices and cooperate with law enforcement authorities to combat the illegal trade in animals. Such actions can make a significant contribution to improving animal protection and increasing the safety and reliability of online transactions.

Brussels, 21 March 2024

Olivier Röpke

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee