

Vytenis Andriukaitis
Commissioner, Health & Food Safety
European Commission
Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

cc Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission
cc Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission

5 December 2016

Dear Commissioner Andriukaitis,

We are writing to you concerning the highly lucrative illegal trade in dogs and cats in the EU. As you will be aware, the illegal trade has implications reaching far beyond simply animal health and welfare considerations, but also affects public health, consumer protection and the smooth functioning of the EU internal market. We are calling upon the European Commission to take the lead in preparing a coordinated approach to this issue by drawing up an Action Plan to tackle the illegal trade in dogs and cats in the EU.

The welfare of dogs and cats involved in commercial practices is a very pertinent topic for many of the EU's citizens. 18% of EU households own a dog, and 26% of EU households own a cat. Many citizens are concerned with the appalling breeding and transport conditions that hundreds of thousands of young dogs and cats bred for illegal sale have to endure every year, frequently resulting in life-long health problems or behavioural issues. According to a recent Special Barometer, 74% of Europeans believe the welfare of companion animals should be better protected than it is now.

The recently published study on the welfare of dogs and cats involved in commercial practices, which was funded by the European Commission, revealed a number of areas of concern which could best be addressed at the EU level. The study estimates that around 46,000 dogs are traded between EU Member States every month. A number of animal welfare NGOs have estimated the actual figure to be much higher, but the study's findings still reveal the sharp contrast with the registrations in the Commission's TRACES system, which in 2014 registered a total of only 20,779 dogs and 2,287 cats involved in intra-EU trade. The considerable difference between these figures is a matter of significant concern and highlights the scale of traded dogs and cats unaccounted for by the official registration system. The EU Pet Travel Scheme is being abused by unscrupulous offenders to illegally sell dogs and cats in a range of EU countries with very scant repercussions.

In terms of public health, there are various zoonotic risks associated with the illegal trade in companion animals. These include the introduction of rabies from endemic parts of Europe into countries that are rabies-free, as well as parasites such as *Echinococcus multilocularis* due to insufficient deworming. Negligent animal care, perpetuated by the illegal trade in companion animals, can also spread other zoonotic diseases currently not covered by EU legislation, such as leishmaniosis. Particularly with the increase in the online sale of pets,

citizens may be unwittingly putting themselves and their families, including their children, at risk for a number of zoonotic diseases.

Regarding consumer protection, under current EU legislation consumers are granted a six-month period in which to raise complaints of defects. When it comes to pets, this does not protect consumers, as inherited disorders and behavioural problems in illegally bred and sold pets may not become apparent until later. A new owner cannot easily return or exchange a sick pet, not least because an emotional bond has already been formed between human and animal, and unsuspecting owners are therefore often left with high veterinary bills and frequent visits to the veterinarian. This is also one of the main reasons for pet relinquishments and abandonment in the EU. If we are able regulate other areas which directly affect our citizens every day, such as food safety or the right to return faulty electrical appliances, we should be able to ensure their consumer rights are similarly protected when they purchase companion animals.

All of these issues have negative implications for the internal market. The study on the welfare of dogs and cats in commercial practices found that the different standards and rules on the welfare of pets in Member States cause distortions of the internal market because the economic valuation of pets is carried out differently. High standards of pet welfare in some Member States increase prices and lead to a competitive advantage for those businesses operating in Member States with lower standards. This situation of unfair competition has an effect equivalent to restrictions on imports and exports between Member States, and the European Commission should act as soon as possible to address any threats to the smooth functioning of the EU's internal market in this regard.

Addressing the illegal trade in dogs and cats requires a comprehensive approach and the involvement of the European Commission, European Parliament and the Member States, including agencies and border and veterinary authorities. Other stakeholders, including veterinary associations and non-governmental organisations working on animal welfare also have an important role to play in this process, including sharing their intelligence and research data. We therefore call upon the European Commission to take the lead in coordinating this approach and draw up an Action Plan to tackle the illegal trade in dogs and cats in the EU.

The Action Plan should cover the following: animal health and welfare, public health, consumer protection, the EU internal market and anti-trafficking considerations.

Only through a coordinated approach can we truly deal a blow to this trade and protect the welfare of not just millions of animals who live so close to us, but the millions of citizens whose wellbeing and rights are being undermined by unscrupulous offenders every day. We would therefore like to request that the issue of an Action Plan on the illegal trade in dogs and cats in the EU be placed on the European Commission's agenda at its earliest convenience.

Thank you for your attention, and we trust that together we can successfully tackle this illegal trade in companion animals and restore citizen's trust in the ability of European decision-makers to ensure the best protection of Europeans and their households all across the Union.

Yours sincerely,

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