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Flemish Council for Animal Welfare – OPINION 14/06/2017

Evaluation of the cat plan in Flanders

This advisory text is a summary. More detailed information can be found in the accompanying opinion guide.

Introduction and context

In 2009, the federal Animal Welfare Council published an opinion pertaining to the stray cat problem and the overpopulation of cats in shelters. The aim was to reduce the stray cat population, ultimately to zero, and to limit the number of cats that end up in shelters as much as possible. The advice proposed a sterilisation obligation for domestic cats (with an exception for breeders), in combination with an identification and registration obligation. An approach was also proposed for the management of stray cat populations.

The federal Council of Ministers incorporated the obligation to sterilise¹ into the Royal Order of 3 August 2012 pertaining to the long-term plan for the sterilisation of domestic cats, whereby the sterilisation and identification and registration (I&R) was gradually implemented. There is currently a compulsory prior I&R and sterilisation for all cats that are sold. The option of introducing a universal I&R and sterilisation following an evaluation is provided in the RO. A legislation proposal to oblige each city/municipality to formulate an action plan for a stray-cats policy was not approved and the cities and municipalities were instead provided with a 'Guide to a stray-cats policy' via a ministerial circular and asked to take action.

The Flemish minister responsible for animal welfare requested that the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare evaluate the adopted measures. A working group was established for this purpose, in which veterinarians, animal shelters, cat breeders and dealers, animal rights organisations and scientists were represented.

¹ In this text, cat sterilisation implies surgically rendering male and female cats infertile.

Evaluation capabilities and limitations

The Council took note of the figures that the Animal Welfare Service annually collates by means of a survey amongst shelters.

These figures indicate that shelters succeed in homing a larger portion of cats via adoption. However, the number of cats taken into shelters is excessive (approximately 29,000 cats annually) and continues to rise.

The choice for early sterilisation is justified, as is apparent not only from international scientific studies, but also from practical experience in Belgium. A survey amongst veterinary practitioners indicates that a majority perform early sterilisation. A survey amongst pedigree breeders indicates that they also experience little or no health or behavioural problems in their cats following early sterilisation. The same applies to animal shelters.

However, the Council requires that special attention is paid to the quality execution of early sterilisations performed by veterinarians and animal shelters.

Decisions pertaining to the sterilisation obligation

On the basis of these figures and the various working group members' findings, the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare confirms that the long-term plan has not yet achieved sufficient results.

The Council emphasises the need for a **mandatory sterilisation of all cats** (with the exception of breeding animals), as described in the 2009 Federal Council for Animal Welfare opinion.

Further encouragement and harmonisation of the local approach to the stray cat problem is also required and preferably mandated by law.

A central cat database will be operational in the three Regions from 2017 onwards. As well as containing identification and registration data, this database will additionally specify whether cats have been sterilised, thus facilitating the strict monitoring of all registered cats.

The Council also discussed the potential risk that the domestic cat's genetic variability might be reduced as a result of the sterilisation obligation, perhaps even leading to its extinction. In view of the current size of the domestic cat population and the option to abolish mandatory sterilisation, that risk is non-existent. As far as pedigree cats are concerned, the Council does note that maintaining a sufficiently large genetic pool must be a point of concern.

The Flemish Council for Animal Welfare specifically proposes the following measures:

- All cats (older than 12 weeks) must be identified and registered. If a kitten is sold at under 12 weeks (including if it is given away) then it must be identified and registered beforehand.
- All cats of 5 months and over must be sterilised.
- Exceptions are possible:
 - shelters: these may acquire unidentified, unregistered, non-sterilised cats, yet must ensure that the animals are identified and registered prior to adoption
 - accredited breeders: these may possess non-sterilised cats older than 5 months providing they are accredited. When selling kittens, these must be identified and registered, and the subsequent (non-accredited or unregistered) owner must sterilise the cat prior to 5 months of age.
 - registered breeders: these may possess non-sterilised cats older than 5 months providing they are registered. When selling kittens, these must be identified and registered, and the subsequent (non-accredited or unregistered) owner must sterilise the cat prior to 5 months of age. They may sell a maximum of one litter per year via this simplified registration.

- The measures must be evaluated after 3 years in order to monitor their impact.

Finally, the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare emphasises that cat owners must understand that the overpopulation of stray cats and cats in shelters is a direct result of domestic cats that are lost, unwanted or allowed to reproduce. The sterilisation policy must therefore be supported by a continuous awareness campaign in which all stakeholders (veterinarians, government, breeders, owners, etc.) fulfil their role. Promoting responsible ownership is particularly central to this. It is equally important that novice cat owners come swiftly into contact with a veterinarian in order to discuss the various aspects of responsible ownership (animal welfare, animal health and public health).