

## **Advice of the Brussels Animal Welfare Council (30/09/2022)**

### *regarding legislation about “hypertypes” and genetic disorders in dogs and cats*

At the end of March 2022, the Brussels Animal Welfare Council (from here on: the Brussels Council) received a request for advice from Minister Clerfayt (the regional Minister for Animal Welfare) regarding hypertypes (deliberately selected exaggerated external features) and genetic disorders in dogs and cats. This request explicitly inquired the necessity to ban the breeding of and/or trade in certain cats or dogs, as was recently proposed in some other countries and regions, specifically referring to the advice of the Walloon Animal Welfare Council about hypertypes of cats, a Norwegian court case about breeding Cavalier King-Charles and English bulldog, the Dutch policy regarding brachycephalic (short-snouted) dogs and the announcement from the Flemish Minister for Animal Welfare of a new decree to better regulate the breeding of healthy cats and dogs.

The Brussels Council discussed this complex issue during its meetings of 01/04/2022 and 30/06/2022, in which several experts (scientists as well as representatives of breeding organizations) were heard.

Without any doubt, hereditary, genetic disorders pose significant health and welfare problems for affected animals within several breeds of dogs and cats.

Take as an example the respiratory problems in short-snouted animals (BOAS, brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome), especially known in dog breeds such as English and French bulldog, pug, boxer, peccary, ... and, for cats, the Persian cat. However, it is important to note that the prevalence of BOAS does not have a 1-to-1 relationship with the breed, or even with the length of the muzzle. For example, there are breeds with medium length muzzles (such as the Norwich terrier) in which BOAS is nevertheless quite common. This is one of the reasons why adjusting breed standards is not a conclusive solution to the problem. In addition, this would require (in each case) the cooperation of the country where the breed originated and thus "owns" the breed standard.

Having discussed some controversial cat breeds with deliberately selected extreme external characteristics, the Brussels Council is not convinced that they demonstrably pose a welfare problem. These breeds include some that are mentioned in the Walloon Council's advice on cat hypertypes, such as the Sphynx (and crosses) without fur and whiskers, the Manx and Cymric without or with a short tail, and the Munchkin with short legs. The Brussels Council judged that the welfare impact of having short legs (per se) and the absence of a coat, whiskers or tail is unclear. Despite the limited argumentation in a position paper from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Utrecht University on crossbreeding Sphynx and Munchkin (into a breed called Bambino), we do not know of any studies on the prevalence of the mentioned (possible) problems and their effect on welfare indicators. If new, further research should reveal a welfare problem, the current advice could, nevertheless, be revised.

Furthermore, one should know that there are many different types of genetic disorders that occur in all animals (and humans), within each breed, with certain disorders, however, being more prevalent in certain breeds. Some examples are hip dysplasia (HD) in German shepherds but also in other large dog breeds, excessive degeneration of intervertebral discs in Dachshunds but also in Basset hounds, syringomyelia in Cavalier King-Charles but also in other small dog breeds, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy in several cat breeds popular in Belgium such as British Shorthair, Maine Coon, Ragdoll, ...

Just as in humans, it will thus never be possible to completely eliminate genetic disorders in dogs and cats. But responsible combinations between breeding animals should allow to significantly reduce the prevalence of certain welfare-relevant disorders, while still preserving sufficient genetic diversity within breeds. If the genetic diversity within a breed becomes too low by completely excluding certain animals from breeding, it is very likely that new genetic disorders will quickly appear within the remaining population. This is also the reason why the Brussels Council is not in favor of bans on certain breeds.

**Responsible combinations between breeding animals** should therefore (according to the experts consulted, as well as the Flemish policy, and the Brussels Council) be the cornerstone for responsible breeding, although there is a **need for specific legislation regarding hypotypes and genetic disorders in dogs and cats**. Currently, this is not adequately regulated by the "Animal Welfare Act" (of 14/08/1986) and the royal decree regarding conditions for the trade in animals (of 27/04/2007).

Because the trade and breeding of cats and dogs, and thus the associated genetic disorders, are phenomena that transcend regional borders, the Brussels Council stresses that the legislation and policy on this matter should also be **uniform throughout the Belgian territory**. This is why the Brussels Council asks Minister Clerfayt to coordinate as soon as possible with the Walloon and especially the Flemish Minister for Animal Welfare on the policy that has already been largely developed in Flanders.

In Flanders, the intention is to place great responsibility on breeding and studbook associations. They will have to present a **breeding program validated by scientific experts** and ensure that combinations are made responsibly. In this way, **studbooks** should come to serve as a "certificate" or "**quality label**" regarding genetic disorders, and should eventually be issued only to breeders who adhere to the scientifically validated breeding program\*. The focus here will be on genetic testing and estimated breeding values, and the preservation genetic diversity. The government will have the ability to oblige dissident breeders or associations to adhere to a validated breeding program. In addition, the various breeding and studbook associations should all recognize each other's studbooks, which is not always the case today. Finally, there is to be a **database and portal site** for the central collection, processing, checking (e.g. by veterinarians) and certification of animal data (e.g. results of genetic and other types\*\* of tests for genetic disorders) and adherence to breeding plans. This database is currently being developed by the Catholic University of Leuven (research group Pet Genetics) and the University of Ghent (laboratory for Animal Genetics), as part of a project aimed at the development of a global breeding approach<sup>1</sup>. This project also collects information on exhibitions and competitions, which are partly responsible for a number of problems such as inbreeding, undesirable characteristics, low genetic diversity, ...

*\*It will still be possible to get an animal with a pedigree from abroad, but the latter will not have the value of a national or regional "quality label". This should be very clearly communicated to the public (potential buyers), and purchase from Belgian breeders should be promoted over foreign breeders.*

*\*\* E.g. testing for hip dysplasia (HD) includes a physical and radiographic examination, and testing for BOAS includes assessments of external characteristics (such as narrowing of the nostrils) or endurance testing.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vlaanderen.be/dierenwelzijn/werking-en-beleid/onderzoeksprojecten-in-opdracht-van-de-dienst-dierenwelzijn/aanpak-van-erfelijke-problemen-bij-honden-en-katten-ontwikkelen-van-een-centrale-databank-en-een-portaalsite>



The Brussels Animal Welfare Council proposes to use an approach similar to that of Flanders, whereby the responsibility will largely lie with the breeding and pedigree associations, who will have to submit a verified breeding program in order to be allowed to award pedigrees. Enforcement should be carried out by the Department of Animal Welfare. Preferably this will be coordinated at national level. This should also be the case for the database and portal site, the latter being accessible to veterinarians, breeders and associations, but also to potential buyers, so that they can verify the efforts of the breeders.

**All of this should be accompanied by scientifically correct information and awareness-raising initiatives for breeders, buyers, those involved in exhibitions, and the general public.** Even though the Brussels Council realizes that awareness-raising alone is not enough to address the problem at hand, it is indispensable. Despite the increasing media coverage of problems such as BOAS, the problems related to genetic disorders are not always acknowledged: a significant proportion of owners do not notice that their animal has problems or consider certain symptoms "cute" or "just breed-specific". On the other hand, it is important that education initiatives take into account the complexity of the issue and tell a nuanced story based on scientifically correct information.

Breeding programs should, as in Flanders, be developed **progressively**. This means that a few popular dog breeds with some more welfare-relevant hereditary defects should come first and, subsequently, the next dog and cat breeds should be selected based on popularity as well as (estimated) prevalence and severity of the genetic defects present in the populations. Proceeding as such, the intention is to eventually cover all breeds, so that they can no longer be bred unless the scientifically approved breeding program is complied with. A list of 41 dog breeds and 14 (groups of) cat breeds for which a breeding program should be developed as a priority (according to the experts consulted), is provided as appendix at the end of the current advice.

The Brussels Council also believes that breeding programs should be dynamic, adaptable to new developments in the sector or in science (e.g. emergence of new breeds or genetic variants, development of new DNA tests, etc.). This requires a good relationship between breeders and scientists, as well as a research framework that is continuously adapted to the needs.

Furthermore, the Brussels Council stresses that the improvement of animal welfare resulting from the approach described above, must be evaluated after 10 years. This does not mean that an effect is expected only after 10 years. An improvement is already expected after the first generation, but experts believe that at least 2 to 3 generations (with an average generation time estimated at 2,5 years) are needed to correctly evaluate progress. And, of course, a start-up with a baseline measurement is also needed. The evaluation can be based on the animal data that will be collected in the central database (kinship, test results, etc.). This is one of the reasons why it is important (also for breeders themselves) to also test apparently healthy animals, not only animals with clearly visible defects. It is essential to allow a correct estimation of prevalence of disorders (within and across breeds), which has been lacking up to now.

If after 10 years it turns out that the approach described above has not yet led to improvement, or if meanwhile it turns out that certain problems (e.g. the prevalence of genetic disorders or the welfare impact of hypertypes) are more important than currently known, the Brussels Council believes that it should still be possible to proceed to a breeding ban for certain breeds or genetic variants.

## **Conclusion**

According to the Brussels Council, there is currently no need to ban certain breeds or genetic variants of dogs and cats, with the exception of the unique case of Fold cats, due to congenital osteochondrodysplasia<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, excluding breeds would enhance genetic impoverishment of the dog and cat population.

Nevertheless, there are many welfare-relevant genetic disorders whose prevalence must be reduced (for some strongly and in a relatively short term). This problem should be addressed at the national level, by allowing only responsible combinations of breeding animals. But a new, uniform and specific legislative framework is needed to ensure that all breeders and studbook associations adhere to the system of scientific verification of the quality of all Belgian breeding programs, so that Belgian studbooks can serve as a "certificate" or "quality label" in terms of genetic disorders.

The Brussels Council therefore asks Minister Clerfayt to coordinate as soon as possible with the Walloon and especially the Flemish Minister for Animal Welfare on the policy on this matter, which has already been largely developed in Flanders.

***Minority advices: see next page.***

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<sup>2</sup> See previous advice from the Brussels Council:  
[advice concerning a ban on the breeding of fold cats due to congenital osteochondrodysplasia - 20180621.pdf \(environnement.brussels\)](#)

### **Minority advice from GAIA, the Belgian Blue Cross, the National Council for Animal Protection and Help Animals**

The animal protection societies ask that strict legislative measures (including breeding bans) be imposed to protect dogs and cat breeds suffering from hypertypes and/or genetic disorders. The majority advice's view that the problems would currently not be large enough to warrant decisive legislative action does not correspond to existing scientific research. The current state of affairs, which places the responsibility for animal welfare problems with the buyer - who, unless the Court intervenes and the buyer invokes Consumer Regulations, is rarely reimbursed - is unjust and inefficient. The animal protection societies ask that (1) the legislator develops an appropriate policy (this is not the job of the Court) and (2) the breeder or seller (not the buyer) be held responsible for animal welfare problems.

### **Minority advice from the French-speaking Council of the Order of Veterinarians (FCOV)**

The FCOV believes that strict legislative measures - including a ban on certain breeds - should be imposed to protect dogs and cats suffering from hypertypes and/or genetic disorders. Taking into account the reality in the sector, actions at the level of a national breeding program cannot be expected to counteract the effects of importation and the fact that many occasional breeders will not comply with the recommendations.

### **Minority advice from Mariella Deбилle (member of the executive board)**

I believe that the introduction of a breeding ban should be considered. I am thinking of a step-by-step approach in which, for example, breeds with anatomical characteristics predisposing to BOAS could be banned first. I have confidence in the expertise and intentions of the above mentioned agencies and groups, but concerns about the manageability of the situation (the actual suffering of the affected animals) in the reality of the sector. The time span of 10 years after which an evaluation will only take place, is an additional concern, as well as how it can be done. Suffering is very difficult to quantify. The BOAS problem is acknowledged as an actual welfare problem, by acknowledged organizations. I am aware that there are equally pressing concerns toward other breeds and that these too need to be scrutinized. Thanks to the experts who diligently put their expertise at the service of animal welfare.



**Appendix: list of 41 dog breeds and 14 (groups of) cat breeds for which a breeding program should be developed in short term**

DOGS

1. Akita
2. American Staffordshire Terrier
3. Australian Shepherd
4. Basset Hound
5. Berger De Beauce
6. Belgian Shepherd Dogs (Groenendael, Laekenois, Malinois, Tervueren)
7. Dogue De Bordeaux
8. Border Collie
9. Boston Terrier
10. Boxer
11. Bulldog (English)
12. Bullmastiff
13. Cavalier King Charles Spaniel
14. Chihuahua
15. Dalmatian
16. Great Dane
17. German Shepherd Dog
18. Miniature Schnauzer
19. MINIATURE PINSCHER
20. English Cocker spaniel
21. English Springer Spaniel
22. Flat Coated Retriever
23. French Bulldog
24. Golden Retriever
25. Bernese Mountain Dog
26. Irish Wolfhound
27. Jack Russell Terrier
28. Labrador Retriever
29. Leonberger
30. Pug
31. Newfoundland
32. Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever
33. Poodle
34. Rhodesian Ridgeback
35. Rottweiler
36. Shetland Sheepdog
37. Dachshund
38. Hungarian Short-Haired Pointer (Vizsla)
39. Bouvier Des Flandres
40. Whippet
41. White Swiss Shepherd Dog

CATS

1. Bengal
2. Bombay
3. British Shorthair and Longhair
4. Burmese
5. Devon Rex
6. Maine Coon
7. Munchkin
8. Norwegian Forest cat
9. Oriental Shorthair and Longhair
10. Persian and Exotic
11. Ragdoll
12. Siamese and Balinese
13. Sphynx
14. Korat

