

COUNCIL ON ANIMAL AFFAIRS (RDA)

MANAGING THE STRAY CAT POPULATION:
REDUCING HEALTH RISKS FOR HUMANS
AND ANIMALS



SUMMARY

Aim and activities of the council

The Council on Animal Affairs (RDA) is an independent council of experts that gives the Minister for Agriculture solicited and unsolicited advice on multidisciplinary issues in the field of animal welfare and health. The Council on Animal Affairs currently comprises around 35 members with very different backgrounds and expertise, who serve in a personal capacity, are independent and not bound by any instructions.

The Council on Animal Affairs deals with issues across the spectrum of public policy on animals: about kept animals, about animals that are “living in the wild”, about hobby farm animals, about companion animals and about production and laboratory animals.

The Council documents the outcome of its considerations in an advisory report. This gives details of the scientific and social background of an issue and gives advice on policy directions and possible solutions to dilemmas. Consensus is not necessary: a Council advisory report can contain minority opinions.

Foreword

In the Netherlands, the cat is the only domestic animal that has virtually unlimited freedom of movement outside its owner’s home and property boundaries. Consequently, a large population of stray cats has arisen alongside the domestic pet cat population. These stray cats can cause a nuisance and carry a risk of transmissible infections and health problems in humans and animals. The Council feels that the latter in particular has been neglected in the research to date, and has therefore produced this advisory report on the issue and made recommendations as to how the problem can be managed and reduced under the title “managing the stray cat population”.

The Council recognises that many people are strongly committed to cat welfare, and therefore that addressing health risks and potential measures can provoke a range of reactions. The advisory report has been drawn up with the aim of managing and reducing problems with the help of cat owners and stakeholders.

The Council hopes that this approach will avoid any negative sentiment towards the cat population.

As it is very important to the Council that its views are widely disseminated, it has produced this brief citizens’ summary of the full advisory report.

The Hague, June 2016



Marc Schakenraad, Secretary

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RAAD VOOR DIERENAANGELEGENHEDEN

Managing the stray cat population: reducing health risks for humans and animals

Unsolicited advisory report

Question: the original question “Does the Netherlands have a stray cat problem and if so, how serious is this problem?” has largely been answered by previous research, specifically by [Wageningen University and Research Centre](#), which was completed after this working group was established. One issue that was neglected in this research is the risk of infection in stray cats, for the animals themselves and their welfare, for public health and for other animals. This advisory report focuses on this risk and how to tackle it.

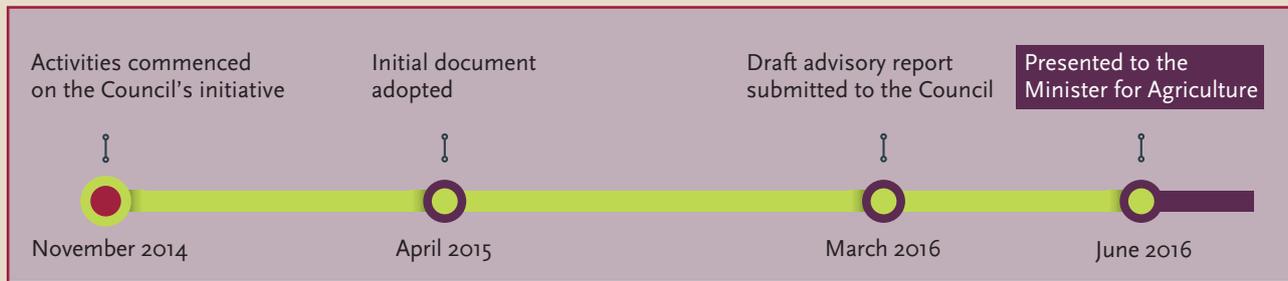
Motivation: in the last century, public concern arose on a number of occasions when attention was drawn to the role that cats play in spreading diseases such as toxoplasmosis. More recently, outbreaks of zoonotic diseases such as bird flu and Q fever have attracted public attention to diseases that are transferred from animals to humans. The Council therefore felt that the hitherto neglected aspect of the risk of infection from stray cats in particular warranted adequate analysis and an appropriate approach.

Considerations: “Over the last few decades, significant efforts have been made at an international level to ensure an effective approach towards combating the spread of parasitic diseases by cats,” states Frans van Knapen, RDA member and chair of the working group that drafted this advisory report.



Photograph: Arenda Oomen

Frans van Knapen



Public Health at Utrecht University's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. "This led to internationally standardised prevention and treatment methods. But if you also bear in mind that a huge population of stray cats remains out of the reach of this approach, it is clear the effect will be limited." Two infectious diseases that frequently occur, and that can have serious consequences for the infected humans and animals, are toxoplasmosis and toxocarosis. Contamination occurs via an environment contaminated by cats. According to Van Knapen, this was the working group's incentive to specifically focus its recommendation on preventing this type of infection.

As discussions on the risks presented by cats can often trigger emotional reactions, the chairman explained that it was important to the working group to "formulate the issue itself, identify its own solutions and stand alongside cat owners." The working group approached the Rijnmond stray cat foundation, *Stichting Zwerfkatten Rijnmond*, in Rotterdam for information on the TNR method: trap, neuter and return.

Recommendation: there would be no stray cats without domestic cats, and the Council therefore also focuses on domestic cats. "Compulsory registration ("chipping") of pet cats is already a big step forward," explains Van Knapen, "because many stray cats are domestic cats that have run away, become lost or been left behind."

Newborn domestic kittens must also, by law, be neutered at as young an age as possible. "Breeders and other certified institutions can be granted an exemption from this general obligation." According to the recommendation, cats must be included on the list of legally permitted pets, the "pet list". Van Knapen: "This makes it possible to formulate ownership conditions, including regular deworming. Cat owners must adhere to these conditions." For stray cats, the Council recommends a consistent policy of TNR.

Van Knapen: "We have seen that this type of approach can be successful where it goes hand in hand with intensive efforts by a large number of volunteers." The Council also recommends research into the feasibility of using these volunteers to regularly deworm stray cats. To promote regular deworming, availability of the relevant resources must be maintained at pet stores, accompanied by effective training for sellers.

Culling by hunting is undesirable apart from in exceptional cases, for instance where cats are very difficult to capture in woodland areas. Finally, the recommendation mentions a number of other measures relating to vaccinations, sandy soils, shelter, not disposing of domestic cat faeces in the organic waste bin and a national blueprint for tackling the stray cat problem.

Brief summary of content

The stray cat problem in the Netherlands has already prompted the publication of a number of research reports, including an analysis study by Wageningen University and Research Centre (Neijenhuis and Van Niekerk, 2015). To complement these studies, the Council on Animal Affairs (RDA) hereby presents an advisory report with an

emphasis on zoonotic diseases and health risks for humans and animals relating to domestic and stray cats. To avoid public concern regarding these zoonotic diseases, the Council aims to manage and reduce problems by making recommendations on the implementation of necessary measures. The Council considers the existence of stray cats to be unavoidable in certain situations, but appropriate measures can limit undesirable consequences and risks. With certain exceptions, the Council believes that the culling of stray cats is not a solution. Cat owners and relevant organisations can help to prevent a negative image of the cat population by taking proportional measures. The advisory report describes the potential health risks presented by stray cats to humans and animals, and how these risks can be reduced. The result is a recommendation to the Minister for Agriculture as to how this issue could be tackled.

Cats can pass on a large number of infections to other cats, but also to other animals such as farm animals, pets, wild and prey animals such as mice, rats and rabbits. They are also jointly responsible for a number of zoonotic infectious diseases in humans.

The full advisory report identifies these potential infections in a number of tables. The most important are *Toxoplasma gondii* and *Toxocara spp* (roundworms).

Both of these zoonotic diseases are transmitted via the environment, are common and have an impact on public health. Toxoplasmosis is the most frequently occurring zoonotic disease in humans worldwide, and as an infectious disease is responsible for a significant disease burden in the Netherlands. *Toxoplasma* can be transmitted to any animal, including farm animals.



Photograph: the Rijnmond stray cat foundation, Stichting Zwerfkatten Rijnmond

The compulsory identification and registration of domestic cats makes it possible to trace the owner of a cat that later becomes a stray.



For the TNR method to be successful, a significant proportion of the cat population, preferably more than 70%, must be captured.



Toxoplasma and *Toxocara* contamination occurs via an environment that has been contaminated by cats.

In the Netherlands, the cat is the only animal that acts as a definitive host, a spreader of oocysts, and is therefore responsible for the existence of this infectious disease in humans and animals. Roundworms (*Toxocara spp*) from cats and dogs are common in the Netherlands and have an impact on the welfare of infected animals. Humans can develop acute infections with alarming symptoms, or infections with non-specific symptoms that sometimes go unrecognised. These diseases can also cause health problems in people with chronic respiratory tract infections. *Toxocara* infections are much more common in stray cats (up to ~73%) than in other cats.

This advisory report focuses on reducing the health risks for humans and animals, particularly from *Toxoplasma/Toxocara*, by providing owners and relevant organisations with advice on measures and their implementation. The advisory report is not a literature study of the nature and scale of the public health issue. The proposed measures are designed to reduce the stray cats population on the one hand, and to prevent contamination of the environment on the other hand. The Council proposes the following measures:

- Compulsory (early) castration/spaying of cats to keep the domestic cat population at a manageable level and to prevent stray cats from reproducing. Exemptions for cat breeding purposes must be linked to conditions relating to vaccination and deworming via a duty to report;
- Further development and validation of one-off vaccinations (immunocontraception) for use in stray cat populations;
- Legally compulsory identification and registration of domestic cats so that owners may be held accountable for providing their cats with the necessary care;
- A ban on the import of cats with an unknown health and vaccination status. Moreover, cats may only be obtained from registered breeders (from purebred cats or otherwise) or via a cat home or shelter;
- Drafting of a blueprint for a national “Service Level Agreement” to tackle stray cat populations, including trap, neuter and return (TNR), based on existing best practices. Municipalities are responsible and reach agreements with implementing organisations that

meet requirements, for instance regarding activities and financing, in the form of a service level agreement (SLA). An SLA is a condition for exemption under the Flora and Fauna Act (subsequently the Nature Conservation Act) (the *Flora- en faunawet* and the *Wet Natuurbescherming* respectively).

- Stray cats that have been captured or placed in a shelter and that are suffering with no hope of recovery and/or have no prospects of a humane existence, are euthanised by a veterinary surgeon.
- Culling (by hunters with a hunting licence) is only acceptable as a last resort to cull a single (ownerless) stray cat in areas where TNR according to the requirements set out in this advisory report is impossible.
- The domesticated cat (*Felis catus*) as a species should only feature on the pet list subject to conditions. Species-specific ownership rules with regard to keeping animals on private property, diet, deworming and hygiene help to reduce the risk to public health. The Council recommends that domestic cats should be assessed according to the pet list system.
- The wide availability of deworming treatments in the retail sector must be guaranteed, provided the parties involved ensure an acceptable level of quality and knowledge among their sales representatives.
- The Council recommends further research within TNR programmes into the feasibility of regularly deworming stray cats via food intake (12 x per year according to the ESCCAP guidelines) with the aid of volunteers.

- Cat faeces (from private homes and shelters/boarding catteries) must be banned from organic waste.
- Inform municipalities about the undesirability and risks of sandy soils in public play areas, and advise them to make different ground cover choices (such as rubber tiles).



Compulsory castration or spaying keeps domestic cat populations manageable and prevents stray cats from reproducing.

- Cats should be kept away from production animal sheds and feed to avoid the transmission of infection to farm animals.

The Council is aware that many of the proposed measures require the use of legal instruments. However, the health of humans and animals is of compelling and urgent importance, and there are virtually no other options to tackle this problem. It is therefore the government's responsibility to intervene. To embed the necessary measures, it is important to coordinate responsibilities between municipalities (shelter/health), provinces (nature/exemption) and central government (public health/animal welfare). The Council also advises the Minister for Agriculture and the responsible Minister for Health, Welfare and Sport to obtain further information about the public health aspects

mentioned in this report. The choice of definitive measures should take into account a One Health assessment as described in the Council's advisory report on this matter in 2016, paying explicit attention to all relevant values of humans, animals and environment. Finally, the Council advises that the measures taken should be reviewed in five years' time.

The Council acknowledges that, alongside health risks to humans and animals, the stray cat population also raises other issues that are a source of public concern and on which opinions may differ. One of these issues is the effect of the stray cat population on ecological interests such as ecological values, predation and hybridisation. The Council advises the Minister for Agriculture to dedicate a separate request for advice on this issue if required.



Photograph: Leny Kolenbrander

Council member Joost de Jongh and his wife adopt a former stray cat. Owners play a key role in managing the stray cat problem.

Appendix

Parties involved in the preparation of this Advisory Report

This advisory report is a product of the full Council on Animal Affairs (RDA). It was prepared by a working group composed of RDA members Dr H. Hopster, J. Th. de Jongh and H.M. van Veen, under the chairmanship of Prof. F. van Knapen. M.H.W. Schakenraad and R.L. van Oudheusden acted as secretaries of the working group.

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