

Advice 04-2021 of the Scientific Committee established at the FASFC on a draft royal decree establishing the conditions relating to the quarantine and isolation of terrestrial animals – Part 1: dogs, cats and ferrets suspected of rabies on import

Terms of reference

The Scientific Committee is requested to issue an opinion on the draft royal decree laying down the conditions for quarantine and isolation of terrestrial animals. Until now, these conditions have not been included in the legislation despite the fact that it is provided for to place an animal in quarantine in specific cases, such as a suspected rabid animal.

Three possibilities for quarantine or isolation for a period determined by the FASFC have been defined in the draft royal decree on the basis of the risk of any animal affected or suspected of being affected by a disease:

- temporary placement in a so-called "high-risk" quarantine facility;
- temporary placement in a so-called "low risk" quarantine facility;
- temporary isolation at home.

More specifically, the following questions are addressed:

1. Opinion on the draft royal decree establishing the conditions relating to the quarantine and isolation of land animals;
2. Opinion on the criteria to determine the risk profile of an animal and the specific conditions for its quarantine;
3. Opinion on the period during which a high-risk animal can be maintained in a low-risk quarantine facility;
4. Opinion on the distance required between low- and high-risk quarantine facilities on the one hand and neighbouring facilities or other places where animals are kept on the other hand and, more specifically, opinion on the holding of a shelter or other facility where animals are already kept, combined with a quarantine facility on the same site.

The draft royal decree aims to establish quarantine conditions for a much wider range of diseases than rabies alone. In this first advice, the Scientific Committee has limited itself to the quarantine conditions related to the introduction into Belgium of an animal suspected of rabies. The Scientific Committee notes for this opinion that the third question is not relevant for an animal disease such as rabies. The question will be answered in a subsequent opinion.

Method

The opinion is based on expert opinion and on criteria and data originating from FASFC when determining the risk profile of a pet (dog, cat, ferret) suspected of rabies.

Conclusion

In the case of rabies, the Scientific Committee is of the opinion that the draft royal decree is necessary to provide a socially acceptable alternative to returning the animal suspected of rabies to the country of origin or to euthanise it. Although quarantine offers a solution to prevent the spread of rabies, it is not an ideal solution from an animal welfare point of view. Quarantine is necessary for a certain period of time (several weeks) and means that the animal has no contact during this period with other animals and possibly also no contact with the owner.

In the case of rabies, not all of the infrastructure and biosecurity conditions specified in Annexes 2, 5 and 6 of the draft royal decree are necessary. No special biosecurity measures are necessary to avoid indirect contact or contact via vectors. It is only necessary to avoid direct contact of the animal with another susceptible animal (all mammals) or with an unprotected or insufficiently protected human being. Hence, it is important to monitor the

serological status of vaccinated humans. The infrastructure and biosecurity conditions are, however, important for quarantine of animals suspected of or affected by airborne or vector-borne diseases. The Scientific Committee will assess the conditions in relation to other diseases in a second opinion.

In order to determine in which type of quarantine a suspect rabid animal should be placed (the risk level of the animal in relation to the suspicion of rabies), the Scientific Committee lists a series of criteria :

- the type of infringement (in decreasing order of importance: uncertainty about rabies vaccination, insufficient or incorrect identification of the animal, lack of administrative documents);
- the origin of the animal (status for rabies endemicity in the country of origin);
- the age of the animal;
- if applicable, the result of a rabies antibody titration.

According to the Scientific Committee, in the case of rabies, a particular distance between low and high risk quarantine facilities and other facilities keeping animals is not required if direct contact is not possible with other animals or people not vaccinated against rabies.

Finally, the Scientific Committee also formulates specific remarks on the draft royal decree.

Recommendations

The Scientific Committee recommends to adapt the terms proposed in the draft royal decree to denominate the two types of quarantine ('high-risk quarantine facility' and 'low-risk quarantine facility') to terms referring to the level of biosafety of the infrastructure and the surveillance measures to be taken in each type of quarantine, as it is for example for laboratories (biosafety level 1, 2, 3, 4). According to the Scientific Committee, there is indeed a risk of confusion between 'a high-risk animal' (for the presence of a suspected disease, whether highly contagious or not, very dangerous or not for humans) and 'an animal suspected of a disease whose type of contagiousness requires a high level of quarantine'. Rather, it depends on the route of transmission of the pathogen.

The Scientific Committee recommends that utmost attention be paid to the effective training of animal handlers who would have to care for suspected rabid animals. The Scientific Committee also recommends that the content of this training be verified. Any person who has to take care of a suspected rabid animal should be vaccinated against rabies beforehand (at least 3 weeks before the arrival of the suspected rabid animal) and have regular serological checks. This should also be taken into account when considering the isolation of such an animal at home (since very few people are vaccinated against rabies a priori and protection is only achieved about 3 weeks after vaccination). The Scientific Committee therefore recommends that this condition be clearly included in Annex 5 of the draft royal decree on the infrastructure and operating conditions for low-risk quarantine facilities.

The Scientific Committee recommends to consider the possibilities offered by digital technologies in order to improve the traceability of animals.

Regarding the necessary sanitary measures, the Scientific Committee recommends that animal welfare aspects should be taken into account when placing animals in quarantine (e.g. measures to ensure both the socialisation of the animal and the learning of the environment).

The full text is available on this website in dutch and in french.