

CONTROL OF WILD AND STRAY ANIMAL NUISANCES

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1. Wild animals may occasionally leave their natural habitats and enter urban areas. Domestic animals which have been abandoned or gone astray may also stray on the streets. The presence of wild animals and straying domestic animals in urban areas can cause nuisances (e.g. noise, hygiene and safety issues). It is the Government's aim to contain such nuisances.

2. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is responsible for the control of wild and stray animal nuisances. From time to time, AFCD received complaints about animal nuisances. Most of these complaints involved nuisances relating to noise, hygiene and safety issues. Other complaints involved, for example, sighting of wild animals, wild bird nests found and requesting AFCD to catch stray animals. In 2018-19, AFCD received 2,012 nuisance complaints about wild animals and 6,024 nuisance complaints about stray animals. In the year, the expenditure incurred in the control of wild and stray animals (including the control of wild and stray animal nuisances) was \$61.9 million. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the control of wild and stray animal nuisances by AFCD.

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3. *Addressing complaints about wild animal nuisances.* In the past five years from 2014-15 to 2018-19, the number of complaints lodged with AFCD about wild animal nuisances increased by 75%, from 1,147 complaints in 2014-15 to 2,012 complaints in 2018-19. The vast majority (95%) of the complaints were related to wild pigs (43%), monkeys (29%) and wild birds (23%) (para. 2.2). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) *Need to ensure that on-site visits are conducted where necessary.* According to AFCD guidelines, where complainants are requesting assistance (e.g. rescue of injured animals), and/or animals are causing

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nuisances (e.g. monkeys grabbing people's belongings), AFCD staff need to either visit the sites to handle the cases or take actions on the cases. Audit noted that, of the 2,012 nuisance complaints about wild animals received in 2018-19, AFCD staff would need to conduct on-site visits in 1,553 cases. However, in a large proportion (65% or 1,005 cases) of the cases, AFCD staff did not conduct any on-site visits. In Audit's view, on-site visits facilitate the effective handling of complaint cases. Documenting the reasons for not conducting any on-site visits, while not presently required under AFCD guidelines, would help enhance accountability (paras. 2.4, 2.6 and 2.9);

- (b) ***Need to improve timeliness in responding to complaints.*** According to AFCD guidelines, upon receiving a complaint about wild animal nuisances, AFCD needs to give an interim reply to the complainant within 10 calendar days, and a substantive reply within 30 calendar days. Audit analysed 1,917 complaints and noted that in 49 (3%) cases, the interim reply was delayed (ranging from 1 to 47 days, averaging 9 days), and in 398 (21%) cases, the substantive reply was delayed (ranging from 1 to 63 days, averaging 8 days) (paras. 2.10 and 2.12); and
- (c) ***Need to follow guidelines on sterilisation of nuisance monkeys.*** In handling monkey nuisance complaints, according to AFCD guidelines, nuisance monkeys captured would be sterilised before releasing back to the wild. Audit noted that, of the 360 nuisance monkeys captured in the period 2014-15 to 2018-19, 29 (8%) had not been sterilised before releasing, contrary to AFCD guidelines. Records did not indicate the reasons for not sterilising them (paras. 2.14 and 2.15).

4. ***Population control programmes for wild animals.*** AFCD has implemented population control programmes for monkeys and wild pigs (para. 2.21). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Need to review sterilisation targets for monkey contraceptive programme.*** Since 2007, contractors have been engaged to capture monkeys on trapping sites and sterilise them in the field. AFCD specified in the service contract the minimum number of monkeys to be sterilised every year. In 2014 to 2019, the actual number of monkeys sterilised under the contracts exceeded the specified minimum number by 15% to 63% every year. AFCD informed Audit that the number of monkeys to be sterilised was not used to

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evaluate the contractor's performance. In Audit's view, there might be a risk that the number of monkeys sterilised might substantially exceed the specified minimum, thus overly reducing the monkey population, which might be contrary to AFCD's intent (paras. 2.21 to 2.25);

- (b) ***Need to address difficulties in locating and capturing monkeys.*** From 2014 to 2019, the number of monkeys trapped by the contractor (see (a) above) decreased by 59% from 499 (for the contract period 2014 to 2015) to 205 (for the contract period 2018 to 2019). Of the 32 troops of monkeys identified, for 17 troops, no monkey had been trapped since January 2014. In August 2019, the contractor remarked that monkeys were highly familiarised with the trap cages, and that trapping monkeys would become more difficult in the future (paras. 2.28 and 2.29);
- (c) ***Need for the “wild pig capture and contraception/relocation programme” (CCRP) to cover more nuisance blackspots.*** Since 2017, under CCRP, a contractor has been engaged to capture nuisance-causing wild pigs on selected sites and sterilise them in the field. AFCD records indicated that there were 77 wild pig nuisance blackspots as at 31 May 2019. However, only 19 (25%) blackspots had been covered by past CCRP operations. While AFCD had planned to cover another 22 (28%) blackspots in future CCRP operations, AFCD had not yet planned to conduct CCRP operations in the remaining 36 (47%) blackspots (paras. 2.21 and 2.34);
- (d) ***Need to expedite evaluation of the contraceptive vaccine used.*** Under CCRP, a multi-year immune-contraceptive vaccine has been used as one of the means to sterilise female wild pigs. To evaluate the effectiveness of the vaccine, AFCD has required the contractor (see (c) above) to recapture wild pigs that were administered with the vaccine during past CCRP operations. Pregnancy tests will be conducted on the recaptured wild pigs. However, as at 31 May 2019, of the 64 wild pigs administered with the vaccine and released back to the wild, only 6 (9%) wild pigs had been recaptured for pregnancy tests. Moreover, while the study on the vaccine had been scheduled for completion in October 2019, due to the limited number of wild pigs recaptured, the contractor had not yet obtained enough samples as at 31 July 2019 to evaluate the effectiveness of the vaccine (paras. 2.37 to 2.39); and
- (e) ***Need to expedite conducting population surveys of wild pigs.*** While a population control programme (i.e. CCRP) has been implemented for wild

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pigs, AFCD has not regularly conducted population surveys of wild pigs. Upon enquiry, in June and September 2019, AFCD informed Audit that a pilot study for wild pig population had been commenced in April 2019 and the first batch of data had been collected for studying the effectiveness of the techniques used in the population survey. In September 2019, AFCD was still figuring out the techniques on precise estimation of the total wild pig population (paras. 2.42 to 2.44).

5. *Need to take into account wild pig nuisances in imposing feeding bans.* AFCD has specified Feeding Ban Area under the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance (Cap. 170), at which the feeding of any wild animal is prohibited. Audit noted that, as at 31 May 2019, there were 61 nuisance blackspots caused by feeding (i.e. 5 blackspots for monkeys and 56 blackspots for wild pigs). While all the nuisance blackspots for monkeys were located within Feeding Ban Area, none of the 56 nuisance blackspots for wild pigs was covered by Feeding Ban Area (paras. 1.8 and 2.49).

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6. *Need to improve complaint records.* According to its guidelines, upon receiving a complaint about stray animal nuisances, AFCD needs to give an interim reply to the complainant within 10 calendar days, and a substantive reply within 30 calendar days. Since January 2018, using a computer system, AFCD has recorded the details of individual complaints (e.g. the date of receipt of a complaint and the follow-up actions taken). However, the date of interim reply and the date of substantive reply to the complainant have not been recorded in the computer system. In Audit's view, there is a lack of management information for monitoring the timeliness of replies to complainants (paras. 3.3, 3.4 and 3.6).

7. *Handling of stray animals.* The vast majority (91%) of stray animal nuisance complaints lodged in the period 2014-15 to 2018-19 were related to dogs (63%) and cats (28%). AFCD operates four Animal Management Centres (AMCs) which are responsible for catching and handling stray dogs and cats as well as animals from other sources. Stray dogs and cats received at AMCs which are left unclaimed, but assessed to be in good health and having a gentle temperament would be transferred to animal welfare organisations (AWOs — i.e. rehoming partners) for adoption by the public (paras. 3.9 to 3.11). Audit noted the following issues:

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- (a) ***Need to improve guidelines on handling stray dogs and cats.*** According to AFCD guidelines, stray dogs and cats not reclaimed after 4 days and failing either health or temperament assessment would be euthanised. According to AFCD, the 4-day period was the minimum time for which a dog/cat had to be kept before euthanasia, and that AFCD would conduct re-assessments for the dog/cat to determine whether it became more suitable for rehoming over time. However, AFCD guidelines did not adequately cover the matter (e.g. for how long a dog/cat should be observed). Some dogs/cats had been observed for a short period (e.g. 4 days) and some others for a much longer period (e.g. 93 days) before euthanasia (paras. 3.12, 3.14 and 3.15); and

 - (b) ***Need to enhance monitoring of rehoming partners.*** AWOs interested in becoming AFCD's rehoming partners need to submit applications to AFCD. As at 11 July 2019, AFCD had 16 rehoming partners (i.e. 16 AWOs) (para. 3.17). Audit noted the following issues:
 - (i) ***Rehoming partners not frequently visited.*** AFCD visited AWOs when assessing their applications for rehoming partnership. Thereafter, AFCD would only visit them where necessary (e.g. AWO changing its management). Of the 16 AWOs, 7 had become rehoming partners for more than 10 years. There was a risk that some rehoming partners had not been visited for a considerable period of time (para. 3.17(a)); and

 - (ii) ***Rehoming records not submitted.*** In 2018-19, 10 AWOs collected dogs and cats from AFCD for rehoming. Audit noted that only 2 (20%) of them had submitted "rehoming records" (showing relevant information about the dogs and cats such as adoption status) as required (para. 3.17(b)).
8. ***Population control programmes for stray animals.*** AFCD has implemented population control programmes for stray animals, and has assisted AWOs to implement a programme for neutering stray dogs (para. 3.21). Audit noted the following issues:
- (a) ***Need to ensure that sterilisation requirement of rehomed dogs and cats is followed.*** According to the undertakings signed by rehoming partners, rehomed animals (i.e. dogs and cats transferred to AWOs for adoption by

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the public) shall be “neutered” (i.e. sterilised) by a registered veterinary surgeon. Rehoming partners, as well as people adopting dogs and cats from the rehoming partners, could take the rehomed dogs and cats to the veterinary clinics engaged by AFCD for free sterilisation (paras. 3.11 and 3.22). Audit found that:

- (i) in 2018-19, only 27% of rehomed dogs and 49% of rehomed cats were sterilised at AFCD-engaged veterinary clinics (para. 3.23); and
 - (ii) for the rehomed dogs and cats which had not been sterilised at AFCD-engaged clinics, it was unclear as to whether they were sterilised elsewhere (e.g. at the adopters’ own expenses). There was a risk that some rehomed dogs and cats might not be sterilised, contrary to the requirement set out in the undertakings (para. 3.24);
- (b) ***Need to keep in view implementation of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) trial programme.*** Under the TNR trial programme, two AWOs recruited carers to feed and catch stray dogs within specific sites. Captured dogs were neutered at AWOs’ designated veterinary clinic where suitable. Captured dogs not suitable for rehoming were returned to the specific sites. In May 2018, the Legislative Council was informed that the TNR concept might not be effective in reducing the stray dog population and nuisances within a short period. As at 31 July 2019, the two AWOs were still running the TNR trial programme. This warrants AFCD’s attention because the TNR concept is different from AFCD’s established practice for handling stray dogs (i.e. catch and removal approach), and the effectiveness of the TNR trial programme is still unknown (paras. 3.26, 3.28 and 3.29); and
- (c) ***Need to ensure timely implementation of management plan for cattle.*** From time to time, AFCD received nuisance complaints about stray cattle and buffalo (hereinafter collectively referred to as stray cattle). In 2011, AFCD set up the Cattle Management Team with the aim of conducting long-term management of stray cattle. In August 2019, AFCD devised a stray cattle management plan, setting out short to long-term goals relating to the control of cattle populations. According to AFCD, it would brief relevant AWOs and stakeholders before implementing the stray cattle management plan. Audit noted that as at mid-September 2019, AFCD had not yet started briefing relevant AWOs and stakeholders (paras. 3.21, 3.31 to 3.33).

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9. ***Need to devise effective measures to control pigeon population in a timely manner.*** For pigeons, the number of nuisance complaints lodged with AFCD increased by 65% from 328 in 2014-15 to 540 in 2018-19. In September 2018, AFCD set up the Feral Pigeon Population Control Unit to tackle problems relating to pigeons. In February 2019, AFCD engaged a contractor to conduct a territory-wide pigeon population survey. The objective of the survey was to investigate the possible reasons for pigeon congregation with a view to devising a plan to control pigeon population. In April 2019, the survey commenced. It was scheduled for completion in March 2020 (paras. 3.39 and 3.40).

Publicity, prosecution and other administrative issues

10. ***Publicity and educational programmes.*** AFCD conducts various publicity and educational programmes to increase public awareness of matters relating to animal control (para. 4.2). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Need to improve the provision of school talks and public seminars.*** From 2014-15 to 2018-19, for school talks, the number of participants, having reached its peak of 21,288 participants in 2015-16, decreased by 8,515 (40%) to 12,773 participants in 2018-19. For public seminars, the average number of participants in each seminar was on the low side. For example, in 2018-19, on average, there were fewer than 10 participants per seminar. The decreasing/limited number of participants is not conducive to publicity of animal control (paras. 4.4 and 4.7); and
- (b) ***Need to ensure display of banners at blackspots and congregation spots.*** It has been AFCD's practice to put up banners at animal nuisance blackspots and pigeon congregation spots, reminding people not to feed the animals there and advising them of the precautions to be taken when encountering wild animals. However, as at 31 May 2019, only 66 (86%) of the 77 wild pig nuisance blackspots and only 71 (43%) of the 166 pigeon congregation spots had banners put up (paras. 4.9 and 4.10).

11. ***Need for timely prosecution action.*** In the course of controlling wild and stray animal nuisances, AFCD may find people violating laws (e.g. relating to abandoning animals). According to the Magistrates Ordinance (Cap. 227), prosecution action should be taken within 6 months from the date of offence (i.e. time-barred after 6 months). Audit examined the 31 prosecution cases which

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AFCD withdrew in 2014-15 to 2018-19 and found that in 2 cases, prosecutions were time-barred and hence AFCD had not instigated any prosecutions (paras. 4.19 and 4.20).

12. *Need to enhance practices on surveillance of African Swine Fever (ASF).* Wild pigs are susceptible to ASF. According to AFCD's surveillance plan on ASF, upon receiving the report of unexplained death of a wild pig (excluding death caused by road-kill) or a sick wild pig, AFCD officers will inspect the wild pig on site and determine if there are suspected signs of ASF infection. Upon enquiry, AFCD informed Audit in May and June 2019 that up to June 2019, no live or dead wild pigs had been tested for ASF by AFCD. In September and October 2019, AFCD informed Audit that a pilot programme for further enhancing the surveillance of ASF in local wild pigs (i.e. in local wild pig carcasses) would run between November 2019 and January 2020. Subject to reviews and modifications, AFCD would roll out a surveillance programme for ASF in local wild pigs later (paras. 4.27 to 4.30).

Audit recommendations

13. **Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should:**

Control of wild animal nuisances

- (a) **review the adequacy of guidelines on the conduct of on-site visits for complaints about wild animal nuisances (para. 2.19(a));**
- (b) **ensure that the reasons for not conducting any on-site visits suggested under the guidelines are documented (para. 2.19(b));**
- (c) **improve the timeliness in responding to complaints about wild animal nuisances (para. 2.19(c));**
- (d) **take measures to ensure that AFCD guidelines on sterilising nuisance monkeys are followed (para. 2.19(e));**

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- (e) **document the reasons for not sterilising any nuisance monkeys captured in the future (para. 2.19(f));**
- (f) **review the sterilisation targets under the monkey contraceptive programme and reconsider the need for specifying a target range/optimum number of monkeys to be sterilised (para. 2.45(a));**
- (g) **look into any difficulties in locating and capturing monkeys under the contraceptive programme, and keep in view the need for enhancing the monkey trapping strategy (para. 2.45(c));**
- (h) **take measures to ensure that nuisance blackspots for wild pigs are adequately covered by CCRP operations (para. 2.45(e));**
- (i) **ensure that effective and timely measures are taken to secure adequate samples for evaluating the effectiveness of the immune-contraceptive vaccine on wild pigs (para. 2.45(f));**
- (j) **expedite conducting population surveys of wild pigs (para. 2.45(g));**
- (k) **keep in view the need to extend Feeding Ban Area under the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance to cover nuisance blackspots for wild pigs (para. 2.52);**

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- (l) **take measures to improve the complaint recording system for stray animal nuisances (para. 3.7);**
- (m) **ensure that adequate guidelines are provided on handling stray dogs and cats (para. 3.19(a));**
- (n) **consider visiting rehoming partners regularly and ensure that they submit rehoming records as required (para. 3.19(c));**
- (o) **look into the reasons for the low percentage of rehomed dogs and cats sterilised at AFCD-engaged veterinary clinics, and take measures to**

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ensure that rehoming partners follow the requirement of sterilising rehomed dogs and cats (para. 3.35(a) and (b));

- (p) keep in view the implementation of the TNR trial programme, and take timely actions to rectify the situation where necessary (para. 3.35(c));
- (q) take prompt actions to brief relevant AWOs and stakeholders on the stray cattle management plan (para. 3.35(d));
- (r) closely monitor the conduct of the territory-wide pigeon population survey (para. 3.41(b));

Publicity, prosecution and other administrative issues

- (s) take appropriate measures to step up AFCD's effort in the provision of school talks and public seminars (para. 4.17(a));
- (t) ensure that banners are displayed at animal nuisance blackspots and animal congregation spots in a timely manner to publicise information about control of animal nuisances (para. 4.17(b));
- (u) ensure that timely actions are taken to instigate prosecutions of offences relating to the control of animal nuisances at the court (para. 4.22(a));
and
- (v) keep under review the implementation of the pilot programme for enhancing surveillance of ASF in local wild pigs, and ensure that the surveillance programme for ASF in local wild pigs is updated with enhancements in a timely manner where appropriate (para. 4.32(c)).

Response from the Government

14. The Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation generally agrees with the audit recommendations.