

# *Companion Animals: the Need for EU Action!*

Sonja Van Tichelen, Director, Eurogroup for Animals

The preparation of the second EU Action Plan on animal protection provides the EU with a timely opportunity to consider what needs to be done to translate the obligations of the new Lisbon Treaty Article 13. The ongoing evaluation of EU animal welfare policy will undoubtedly highlight the areas in which Community action has been lacking up to now.

Eurogroup for Animals, representing 43 animal protection organizations, is of the opinion that the welfare of companion animals has been overlooked in the past and calls on the Commission to include this topic in the next Action Plan. The welfare of companion animals should not be the exclusive remit of member states as there are a variety of reasons why Community action is necessary:

- internal market and free movement of persons and goods: a majority of households have companion animals and companion animals are being traded, legally and illegally, among member states
- economic significance of the sector: breeding and sales of companion animals and the related industries such as animal feed, veterinary care and medicines together represent a value comparable to the agriculture sector
- animal health and welfare: different health requirements or the absence or lack of control on national rules within a free EU market constitute a risk to animal health, welfare and human health, as is the case for the puppy trade and exotic companion animals
- enforcement and penalties: although most member states have introduced national laws even on dog identification, the enforcement is rather weak and penalties are low. In cases where specific countries are stricter, traders move to a neighboring country to continue their activities. The use of the internet is another cross-border sales outlet which is difficult for a single country to control.

The failure by member states individually to seriously manage companion animals results in the dumping of thousands of unwanted animals every year in the streets and in animal shelters, where many are euthanized if no new homes can be found. Responsibility for unwanted companion animals, for education and for the enforcement of legislation has been shifted without question to NGOs, animal shelters and rescue centers that themselves do not have sufficient funding and resources and receive no public money.

Companion animals provide a lot of benefits to society, such as wellbeing and even improved health of the owners and families, and added economic value. This also means that society and the public authorities – both national and European – need to put mechanisms in place to limit the negative consequences and to prevent problems relating to animal welfare, animal health and overpopulation.

Areas for action at the EU level include the regulation and licensing of breeding and selling, identification of animals, limiting the type of animals to be kept (in particular for exotic animals), the education of consumers and the exchange of information and expertise among member states.