



Brussels, 15 April 2020

Dear President von der Leyen,
Dear President Sassoli,
Dear President Michel,

The global COVID-19 pandemic has placed us at a historical crossroad, putting peoples' health at serious risk as well as our social and economic well-being across Europe and worldwide. Against this backdrop, the European block and national governments are duly responding to the situation by taking immediate measures. Meanwhile, certain important policies aiming at challenging the existing economy, such as the Green Deal or the Farm to Fork Strategy are under enormous pressure to be delayed or less ambitious than originally expected.

While the number of infections from COVID-19 increases exponentially across the world, scientists and officials suspect the virus originated in a meat market where live animals are sold ('wildlife markets') in China. In this type of market live animals, including both wild and domesticated species, are often packed in small cages, sold and slaughtered on the spot. Research suggests that bats and pangolins may have been involved in the transmission of the virus to people. The possible origin of the virus developing in a 'wildlife market' is entirely plausible given that it is not the first time that infectious diseases have been linked to the live animal trade and wildlife markets in recent years. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), inflicted by a coronavirus, was also believed to have emerged from wildlife markets in China.

To date, reports on animal infections are limited to two dogs in Hong Kong and two cats, one in Belgium¹ and one in Hong Kong². These animals belonged to owners, who were infected with SARS-CoV 2, thus making the owners the suspected source of the virus. These are isolated cases of human-to-animal transmission of SARS-CoV 2. More recently, a tiger at the Bronx Zoo has tested positive for the coronavirus and is thought to have been infected by an asymptomatic zookeeper³. To date, there is no evidence of animal-to-human transmission of the disease.

¹ <https://www.brusselstimes.com/all-news/belgium-all-news/103003/coronavirus-belgian-woman-infected-her-cat/>

² <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202003/31/P2020033100717.htm>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52177586>

The current situation puts into focus the weaknesses of the predominant system of intensive farming of animals, as well as the compromises on farm animal welfare resulting from our high reliance on animal proteins. Along with the intensification of animal farming, production has specialised, both at the farm and at the regional level where animals are born, fattened and slaughtered in different countries and also rely on massive imports of feed from other regions and certainly have an impact on global biodiversity. As a consequence, animal production in Europe is overly dependent on long-distance transport of animals and products. Massive imports of protein feed from Latin America, or cross-border transport of live animals for fattening or slaughter across Europe, are just a few examples of this fragile dependence. These activities carry a high risk during a time of global pandemic and, moreover, can increase the risk of spreading a virus. Resilience of the current heavily subsidised and intensive animal farming system is questionable. Furthermore, in the context of global warming where the number of natural disasters and pandemics is expected to increase⁴, risk reduction should be at the heart of political concerns.

The crisis also highlights the vulnerability of certain practices involving animals, such as circuses and the keeping of wild animals as exotic pets, which is less and less acceptable to Europeans. The adopted restrictions can lead to severe problems for animals kept in entertainment and tourism facilities. When livelihoods are threatened, the sustainability of these activities, as well as the possible abandonment or neglect of companion animals and exotic pets is a serious concern, considering that the 2007 financial crisis had similar consequences⁵. These animals all have very specific needs, and there is currently a serious lack of capacity within European sanctuaries and rescue centres to host so many new animals. The neglect can also be an indirect consequence of the restrictions on the movement of people, with some workers unable to join slaughterhouses or farms, and equine owners not allowed to travel to the stable to take their horses out of their boxes.

Despite the great efforts made by the European Union to combat illegal wildlife trade and trafficking, many species are still endangered worldwide. Legal and illegal trade in wildlife species continues to supply an increasing demand for traditional medicine and poses serious risks to both animals and human health. Pangolins are commonly used as ingredients, as well as species such as tigers, lions and bears, with bear bile injections now even being officially⁶ as a treatment for COVID-19. Whether these animals are farmed or poached from the wild to supply the demand, the risk of disease transmission is prevalent across all aspects of wildlife trade.

The terrible situation that the world is presently facing should be the opportunity to reconsider the approach humans have toward animals and the environment. The interconnection between these three components of life must be acknowledged, such as by adhering to the “one health⁷” and “one welfare⁸” approaches, integrating them on the international scene, and in particular in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations.

⁴ <https://www.who.int/globalchange/climate/summary/en/index5.html>

⁵ See for instance on horses: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1340486/Thousands-horses-ponies-abandoned-Irish-countryside-financial-crisis-bites.html>

⁶ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/chinese-government-promotes-bear-bile-as-coronavirus-covid19-treatment/>

⁷ <https://www.who.int/features/qa/one-health/en/>

⁸ <https://www.onewelfareworld.org/>

We are calling on the European Union and its governments to demonstrate leadership:

- ◆ To immediately put an end to the long-distance transports of live animals across the EU and to third countries, limiting transport distances to the closest appropriate slaughterhouse and have meat and genetic material transported instead;
- ◆ To keep a high level of ambitions for the Green Deal including the Farm to Fork Strategy as well as in the Common Agriculture Policy, to promote a shift towards shorter production chains, higher-welfare animal farming practices addressing antimicrobial resistance (AMR) respecting the environment and restoring biodiversity;
- ◆ To define adequate veterinary care and animal keeping as essential services and ensure sufficient support to rescue centres and sanctuaries because of the imminent increase in rescue requests
- ◆ To end the use of wild animals in circuses to ensure zoonotic diseases are not spread through public displays and close contact with animals that spend their lives in cramped conditions and constantly traveling;
- ◆ To use all diplomatic means to put pressure on international partners to ban markets where wildlife and cats and dogs are sold and to unequivocally exclude the use of wildlife, including from captive bred specimens, in the production of traditional medicine;
- ◆ To address the potential risks to human health from the commercial trade in wildlife – whether originating from captive-breeding, farming or taken from the wild – and act to end inter-country trade in wild animals or limit such trade in order to mitigate those risks;
- ◆ To support the embedding of the “one health” and “one welfare” approaches that includes animals in every Sustainable Development Goal, and support the creation of a new goal, specifically on the human-animal connection at the review of the 2030 Agenda.

Our organisations acknowledge the leadership already taken during these challenging times. We thank you for your interest in the above-mentioned topics and look forward to continuing to support you and your services to ensure a more resilient and ethical Europe and World.

Yours sincerely,

Gerald Dick
Chief Programme Officer
FOUR PAWS / VIER
PFOTEN

Olga Kikou
Head of Compassion in
World Farming EU

David Garrahy
EU Adviser
World Animal Protection

[Annex: Open letter to the WHO on Wildlife Trade and COVID- 19]