

The current position of the short-muzzled dog breeds in the Netherlands and what preceded it

In the Netherlands and (Northern) Europe, there has been increasing attention for decades for the health and well-being of dogs in relation to their appearance. The general opinion, also of the Raad van Beheer (Dutch Kennel Club), is that there should be no excessive breed characteristics which can harm the health and well-being of dogs.

The Netherlands has an active government that is committed to animal welfare. For example, in 1988 research was conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fisheries (now Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality), which focused on problems that arise directly or indirectly from FCI breed standards. It led to the book 'Mooi, mooier, mooist: schadelijke raskenmerken bij rashonden' (Beautiful, more beautiful, most beautiful: harmful breed characteristics in pedigree dogs) – (J.H.E. Snijders-Verheijen, 1988).

During this period, the European Convention for the Protection of Animals also commented on problems related to the appearance of animals. For example, the directive provides advice to set a limit on the minimum nose length. The convention has been ratified by 24 countries (The European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (ETS125, 1987).

In many European countries, regulations state that a best efforts obligation applies to breeding and that no harmful breed characteristics may be transmitted in breeding.

In the Netherlands, there has been growing attention from national media and animal welfare organisations for years for health problems in pedigree dogs. Examples include the English documentary 'Pedigree dogs exposed' (2008), in which the problems with, among others, the English Bulldog and Pug emerged. Historical images have made it clear that, over the years, certain breeds of dogs have acquired an increasingly extreme appearance, with corresponding health problems. In addition, reports have also been made for Dutch television by research and science journalists, such as 'Einde van de rashond' (End of the pedigree dog), broadcast by Zembla in 2010 and more recently 'Doorgefokte rashonden' (Overbred pedigree dogs), broadcast by Radar in 2017. Campaigners use the short-muzzled breeds as an example of breeds with an increased risk of health problems related to their appearance.

The English Bulldog breed clubs have cooperated with the Raad van Beheer and veterinarians to impose additional health requirements. Research of 40 English bulldogs in collaboration with the University of Utrecht has shown that the assessment of respiratory sounds was the best predictor for abnormal airways. This led to a covenant in 2015 whereby all English Bulldogs used for breeding must have passed a fitness test successfully, among other things.

The Netherlands has continuously drawn international attention to this subject, including during FCI meetings of shows and judges and the FCI Breeding Commission. At these meetings, national and international criticism of the short-muzzled breeds was discussed, and representatives from the Netherlands gave presentations about current developments in the Netherlands. In addition, the Netherlands was, partly at the request of the FCI, present at sessions on animal welfare and excessive breed characteristics in the European Parliament. Many European governments are working closely together to achieve a uniform policy for short-muzzled breeds in Europe. National and international veterinarian organisations are also working together to achieve a uniform health policy. All large and international operating petfood companies now have the policy that they no longer use images of short-muzzled breeds in their advertising campaigns. This is due to the negative international publicity surrounding these breeds.

The Raad van Beheer was very surprised and displeased with the open letter of the chairman of the FCI. The Raad van Beheer do not recognise themselves in the picture presented by the chairman and



they feel insulted by him. The FCI has been continuously informed about current developments in the Netherlands. On 12 May last, we made another request for support to the FCI. The chairman of the FCI received a copy of this letter we sent to the FCI in which we explained the Minister's decision and its consequences for the breeding and for the issue of pedigrees of dogs belonging to the short-muzzled breeds. We urged the FCI to discuss this with us.

During the European Section meeting in Austria in the summer of 2019, the chairman of the FCI promised that the FCI Scientific Commission would draw up a report and recommendations regarding the problems surrounding short-muzzled breeds within 6 weeks. The Netherlands again sounded the alarm during the FCI show and judges meeting in February 2020. The chairman of the FCI indicated at this meeting that he was very frustrated that the FCI Scientific Commission still had not drawn up a report and recommendations after formal requests from the FCI Board. It is the responsibility of the FCI Board to take appropriate action towards the relevant commission.

Situation in the Netherlands (overview of legislation)

The Animals Act, which came into force in the Netherlands in July 2014 to replace the Animal Health and Welfare Act, describes in Article 1.3 that animals may not be exposed to hunger or thirst, incorrect nutrition, physical and physiological discomfort, nor to pain, injuries and illnesses, anxiety and chronic stress.

In this Act, Article 2.6 offers the Minister the possibility to set rules that relate to, among other things:

- prohibiting breeding or using animals for breeding that have a certain condition or appearance that could affect the health or welfare of the animal or the offspring of the animal;
- the method of breeding, including a ban on certain breeding methods;
- making the health examination to be implemented by the breeder mandatory prior to breeding.

Based on Article 2.6 paragraph 3, the Minister may also draw up rules for the organisations that manage the breed registry. In addition, the Minister may impose conditions that must be met before animals can be entered in the breed register or before animals can be bred.

Based on Article 2.15, the Minister may prohibit the organisation of competitions and inspections as well as participation in inspections and competitions.

Following on from this point, the Minister has the authority, based on Article 2.16, to impose a prohibition on participating in an exhibition with certain animals or a prohibition on admitting certain animals to an exhibition.

In 2014, the Animal Keepers Decree also came into force in the Netherlands. Article 3.4 states, among other things, that it is forbidden to breed with pet animals in a way that harms the welfare and health of the parent animal or the offspring.

In any case, breeding will prevent, as far as possible:

- a. that serious hereditary disorders and diseases are transferred to or may arise in offspring;
- b. that the appearance of animals is transferred to or may arise in offspring, which will have harmful consequences for the welfare or health of animals;
- c. that serious behavioural abnormalities are transferred to or may arise in offspring;
- d. that reproduction occurs in an unnatural way;
- e. that the number of litters or offspring produced by a pet animal will harm the health or welfare of this animal or the offspring;

On 22 March 2019, Minister Carola Schouten (LNV), announced six enforcement criteria for breeding with short-muzzled dogs, necessary for the implementation of Article 3.4 Animal Keepers Decree. These criteria focus on appearance, such as the shape of the skull, the nose and the eyes as well as fitness. The criteria were developed on behalf of LNV by the division of Animals in Science and Society and the Expertise Centre Genetics of Companion Animals of the Department of Veterinary Medicine and published in the report 'Breeding short-muzzled dogs'.

Breeding with animals that 'have a specific condition or an appearance that can affect the health or welfare of the animal or offspring,' has not been permitted under the Animal Act for a long time. However, to date it has been difficult to enforce the law because no objective criteria were available. According to the Minister, the criteria will be applied by the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) and the National Animal Welfare Inspection (LID) in enforcing the rules regarding breeding. Veterinarians and breeders can also use the criteria when selecting healthier parent animals.

The letter from the chairman of the FCI disregards the fact the Raad van Beheer has taken firm action against the Minister's decision. In August 2019, the Raad van Beheer, together with the affiliated breed clubs of short-muzzled dogs, submitted a scientifically-based breeding supervision plan to the Minister, containing measures regarding eye and respiratory health. The breeding supervision plan considers many more aspects than just brachycephaly to promote the health of pedigree dogs.

In early May 2020, the Minister responded to the breeding supervision plan. Although the Minister expressed her appreciation for the efforts of the Raad van Beheer and the relevant breed clubs, and largely endorses the measures from the breeding supervision plan, she has not adopted the plan and maintains the criteria set last year.

The Minister does make one concession, namely that it is temporarily permitted to breed with parent animals of which one parent does not meet the muzzle length criterion (craniofacial ratio, CFR) and the other parent animal does. This can be done through selection based on the policy of the Raad van Beheer. A parent animal with a CFR less than 0.3 may, therefore, only be combined with a dog with a CFR greater than 0.3. Both parent animals should also score sufficiently on the other 5 enforcement criteria.

If the Raad van Beheer continues registering brachycephalic breeds without applying the current applicable criteria, it is only a matter of time before the Minister imposes the law on the Raad van Beheer by prohibiting registration and by considering acting contrary to this rule as a criminal offence. Not to mention the unprecedented major negative impact on the image of pedigree breeding as a whole (the majority of our breed associations and breeders do everything they can to breed healthy pedigree dogs), the Raad van Beheer would hereby also act in violation with its own statutes. After all, it states that one of its tasks and objectives is not only to promote the health and welfare of dogs and dog populations, but also to make it its task to comply with the legal rules and the implementing rules based thereon regarding the health and welfare of dogs.

At the moment, there are many photos and flyers circulating on social media that say 'no' to slightly more nose length and 'yes' to the heads as they seem to be the norm today. This picture is not complete. On the contrary. There are also breeders of short-nosed breeds who have (unfortunately) defied the Raad van Beheer and the FCI, precisely because they have received insufficient space to breed healthy dogs.

If we look at some old photos of these breeds from the last century, which is not that long ago, should we not ask ourselves who we are to say that this is the only correct type? How would breeders at the time react to the breeds as they are today? There is talk of preserving a national

cultural heritage. So let us take a good look at the books and the available photo material from that time and use these photos as a standard.

Are we, as representatives of the dog world, still able to reflect on our breeds and give them their physical characteristics? When do we say: this nose length is long enough or too short?

If we showed these photos to the public in the street from about 60 years ago and now, which would be their favourite?

The Netherlands is a democratic and prosperous country. This has its advantages and disadvantages. The welfare standards are high for both people as well as their animals. We have delegated responsibilities in cynology. For example, the Raad van Beheer is an umbrella organisation and the individual breed clubs are responsible for the breeding policy of their breed. As a Kennel Club, we have repeatedly urged the breed clubs of extremely short-muzzled breeds to include additional health measures in their breeding policies. At that time there was no will to adapt, at least not enough. In addition, it was considered the problem was not with pedigree dogs, but only with the look-alikes.

Partly under pressure of social developments, the government wanted to provide clarity and asked the Dutch University of Veterinary Medicine to define a responsible and scientific limit. The limit is independent of the breed and is based on appearance.

This limit has been established and communicated to the enforcing bodies of the ministry. In the past year, the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) has performed various checks on the breeders. Therefore, preparation for enforcement has already started in the Netherlands. The Raad van Beheer strongly urged to be involved. The government rejected that request and has not adopted the constructive proposals - our breeding supervision plan.

As indicated above, the Raad van Beheer and the relevant breed clubs of short-muzzled breeds have tried to turn the tide and have submitted an alternative plan of action based not only on appearance but rather on the functionality of the dogs. This plan has not been adopted and the Minister has indicated that pedigree dogs must meet the legal criteria.

The Raad van Beheer is not primarily responsible for breeding the individual dogs. The responsibility always lies with the breeder. The Raad van Beheer does have an important role, which is expressed under the header 'General cynological interest'. The statutes indicate several goals. Some examples that are important in this context: the promotion of cynology in the Netherlands; the establishment of rules regarding all forms of dog sports in the Netherlands as well as combating all actions that may damage the interests or reputation of Dutch Cynology, regardless of whether these acts are carried out in or outside the Netherlands; the promotion of the health and well-being of dogs and dog populations; implementation of the legal rules and the implementation of rules based thereon regarding the health and welfare of dogs and dogs populations; to ensure optimal social embedding of Cynology in Dutch society;

This ensures that, based on the enforcement criteria, the Raad van Beheer can currently only issue dogs with pedigrees if the enforcement criteria from our national government have been met. It is up to the General Assembly to decide whether the descendants of combinations that do not meet these enforcement criteria will be issued a certificate of parentage.

To conclude this statement, it is good to emphasise once again and to express explicitly that the Raad van Beheer, as co-founder of the FCI, is very committed to its breeders and all recognised FCI breeds. The Raad van Beheer and their members have made great efforts in recent years to achieve a responsible breeding policy regarding all (pedigree) dogs. Unfortunately, our breeding supervision plan for short-muzzled dogs has not been adopted by the government and, as an organisation, we have to conform to national legislation. For the sake of good order, it is good to indicate that the Raad van Beheer also acts in full accordance with the articles of association and internal regulations of the FCI. The Raad van Beheer remains committed to the preservation and responsible breeding and keeping of all FCI breeds and requests understanding and support from the national and international dog world.

Dutch Kennel Club Raad van Beheer

Publication date: 25 May 2020