

Senior vet hammers Pitbull ban

swissinfo January 18, 2006 9:17 AM



As consultations over a ban on Pitbulls drew to a close on Wednesday, one of the country's leading vets says the authorities are making a big mistake.

Pierre-François Gobat, president of the Association of Cantonal Veterinarians, believes the knee-jerk reaction by the government and politicians has no scientific basis and will not make people safer.

Final consultations on the Pitbull ban took place on Wednesday (Keystone)

On Friday the government proposed a series of measures against "dangerous dogs", including a ban on Pitbull terriers and tighter restrictions on 13 other breeds. It follows a fatal dog attack on a child near Zurich seven weeks ago.

Final consultations on the package, which was drawn up by a group of experts appointed by the Federal Veterinary Office, took place on Wednesday.

The government is expected to decide early next month whether it will adopt the proposals.

Gobat, who is the cantonal veterinary officer for Neuchâtel, is in no doubt that the process is a rush job and a panicked reaction to the outcry that followed the tragedy.

"I am convinced that neither the group of experts nor the Federal Veterinary Office has had enough time to consider all the consequences of their actions," Gobat told swissinfo.

"We are making people believe that it is just these breeds that are a problem when everyone knows that any dog can be dangerous depending on the circumstances."

Prevention programmes

Gobat pointed out that French-speaking cantons had set in motion various programmes, after a fatal dog attack in Germany five years ago.

By contrast, the German-speaking part of the country – with the exception of Basel – had done very little.

"Now with the case in Zurich, this has become an issue of national importance and I think many of [the German-speaking cantons] were caught by surprise."

He said cantonal vets agreed on some of the proposed restrictions, but there was a big split on the "arbitrary and disproportionate" measures against Pitbulls and the 13 listed breeds.

Dog attacks

Over the past five years Neuchâtel has introduced a number of projects to reduce dog attacks, focusing on prevention and making the public more aware of how to behave around dogs.

Teams of dog experts tour the canton's primary and nursery schools offering advice to children, who made up a fifth of victims in 2003. A brochure advising the public on how to avoid getting bitten and what to do in the event of an attack has also been issued.

In 2001 Neuchâtel's veterinary service launched a pioneering system for logging and investigating every dog attack in the canton. Offending animals are examined by a behavioural specialist and can be ordered to wear a muzzle, kept on a leash or even put down.

The measures would appear to be bearing fruit: in 2003 there was a 30-per-cent drop in dog bites in Neuchâtel, down from 120 to 86.

Of the 16 serious dog attacks that have occurred in the canton over the past three years, none was committed by a Pitbull. Only one of them involved a breed on the government hit list – a Rottweiler.

"Our statistics show that these breeds are only responsible for ten per cent of dog bites. This project to ban Pitbulls and impose restrictions on these 13 breeds has no scientific basis," said Gobat.

Public opinion

Responding to Gobat's comments, the Federal Veterinary Office said public opinion had influenced moves to ban Pitbulls and impose restrictions on 13 breeds.

But it denied ignoring scientific evidence showing these breeds were responsible for only a small percentage of dog attacks.

"We have taken account of all aspects, including scientific evidence, but it is clear that public opinion does play a role in the process," Cathy Maret, spokeswoman for the Veterinary Office, told swissinfo.

Maret said that while there were divisions among cantonal vets on the issue of the ban and the list of breeds, there was general agreement on the other measures.

She added that prevention work was a key part of the government's plans, which include the creation of a national register for dog bites based on the Neuchâtel model.

swissinfo, Adam Beaumont

URL of this story

<http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/swissinfo.html?siteSect=105&sid=6391205>

Related Sites

Federal Veterinary Office: <http://www.bvet.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en>

Cantonal Neuchâtel Veterinary Service (French):

<http://www.ne.ch/neat/site/jsp/rubrique/rubrique.jsp?StyleType=marron&CatId=3832>

Canton Neuchâtel information on dogs (French):

<http://www.ne.ch/neat/site/jsp/rubrique/rubrique.jsp?StyleType=bleu&CatId=3969>

Canton Neuchâtel: <http://www.ne.ch/neat/site/jsp/bienvenue/anglais.html>