



SPEECH BY MS GRACE FU, MINISTER OF STATE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE SEMBAWANG ANIMAL QUARANTINE STATION (SAQS), FRIDAY, 2 FEBRUARY 2007 AT 11.00 A.M.

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning. I am happy to join you here for the official opening of AVA's Sembawang Animal Quarantine Station.

2 The opening of the SAQS today marks a significant milestone. From its humble beginnings in Jurong, offering only basic quarantine shelter, the animal quarantine station is now offering more spacious and modern facilities, to make the stay of imported dogs and cats more comfortable.

The importance of quarantine

3 As Dr Chua Sin Bin, the CEO of AVA, has mentioned, quarantine of dogs and cats is important to ensure that Singapore remains free of rabies. In a study commissioned by the World Health Organisation in 2004, the annual number of human deaths worldwide caused by rabies is estimated to be 55,000. An estimated 10 million people receive post-exposure treatment each year after being exposed to rabies-suspect animals.

4 Singapore has been free of rabies since 1953. This is an impressive record, given that we import a few thousand dogs and cats each year, and that rabies is endemic in our neighbouring countries. The Indonesian island of Flores was previously free of rabies. In late 1997, a single rabid dog arrived in a boat and entered its shores. Within a few months, 10 people were reported to have died of rabies in the East Flores district and many dogs had developed rabies. By 2000, reports quoted nearly 90 people had died of rabies there.

5 On the other hand, countries renowned for their strict quarantine policies, such as the United Kingdom, have modified their quarantine requirements to make it easier for dogs and cats to be imported. Where previously the quarantine period in these countries could be up to six months, it is now possible for dogs and cats from certain countries to enter these countries without any quarantine at all.

6 AVA has been keeping abreast of and assessing the international developments in quarantine practices. AVA has already adopted a risk management approach in tackling issues on animal and plant health, and food safety through imposition of appropriate risk mitigation measures. Recent examples are the import of poultry and eggs from Disease-Free Zones in West Malaysia following the avian influenza outbreaks there, as well as the resumption of beef imports from the USA, which had been affected by a few cases of BSE.

Proposed new quarantine policy

7 Quarantine has been deemed a “necessary evil”, since its introduction in the 1960’s. AVA recognises that its current 30-day quarantine requirement causes some stress and inconvenience to both the owner and the pet.

Only dogs and cats from four countries, namely Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland, are currently exempted from AVA's quarantine requirements.

8 Having studied the risk management approaches of other previously "strict" countries, AVA is now prepared to consider implementing a similar regime for the quarantine of imported dogs and cats.

9 Under the proposed risk management approach, dogs and cats which meet AVA's vaccination and test requirements and come from countries assessed by AVA to be of minimal rabies risk could be imported into Singapore without the need to undergo quarantine. However, dogs and cats from non-rabies-free countries would still need to undergo quarantine, if AVA assesses that the risk of rabies introduction is significant.

10 AVA will announce the details in due course, once they have been finalised. I am sure that many dog and cat owners would welcome this move by AVA. But even if the quarantine policy is revised, there will still be animals that cannot be exempted from quarantine based on AVA's risk assessment. For them, AVA has provided this modern new facility, to ensure that their stay in quarantine will be as comfortable as possible.

11 It is now my pleasure, to declare the Sembawang Animal Quarantine Station open. Thank you.