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December 11, 2017

Dear Laura Weatherford, DVM and SCVMA President:

Thank you for responding to the LAAS Commissioners with your concerns about feeding a plant-based diet to the Los Angeles shelter dogs. We would like to take the opportunity to address your concerns. We recognize the perception that the current diet seems to be working, so why change it? The popular view amongst many veterinarians is that dogs require meat in their diets. Dogs can indeed process both meat and plant-based foods, but they do not need meat to survive. We would like to respectfully bring to your attention that there are commercially available, plant-based diets that can meet the dietary requirements of shelter dogs, while improving the health of the dogs, and also addressing some of the most urgent issues of our time. We are sleep-walking off a cliff with regard to climate change, availability of fresh drinking water, and a build-up of dangerous, carcinogenic toxins in our bodies, the bodies of our animal companions, and the environment. The UN study entitled *Livestock's Long Shadow* [LEAD website: <http://www.virtualcentre.org>] points to animal agriculture as the leading cause of climate change. Given the life-threatening environmental problems both humans AND dogs face today, and given that scientific evidence supports the viability and benefits of nutritionally complete and balanced plant-based diets for dogs, we ask you to reconsider your position. *"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write; but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."* -- Alvin Toffler

We agree with you that the shelter environment is extremely stressful. It is true that some of these dogs may be injured, or suffer from other conditions requiring increased nutrition. If you have any doubts that a plant-based diet can meet the needs of stressed, high nutrient-requiring dogs, please refer to a study conducted in the *British Journal of Nutrition* in 2009, showing that a carefully balanced meat-free diet can maintain normal hematological (blood) values in dogs during periods of extreme exercise. [An experimental meat-free diet maintained hematological characteristics in sprint-racing sled dogs. Brown WY, Vanselow BA, Redman AJ, Pluske JR. *Br J Nutr*, 2009 Nov, 102(9):1318-23.] These sled dogs were pushed to their physiologic limit and still maintained normal blood levels of critical nutrients while eating a plant-based diet. Surely such a diet can meet the needs of the vast majority of our shelter dogs.

Another issue raised in your letter has to do with providing dogs with the nutrients “...found in their natural setting...thus enhancing their immune systems and their ability to deal with disease and stress.” We have two concerns regarding this statement. First, can you cite a study demonstrating that shelter dogs require meat-based food, or that meat-based diets boost immunity? Second, there is nothing natural about the high levels of toxins and carcinogens found in meat-based dog food. In fact, with the epidemic of cancer we are seeing in dogs (currently 1 in 2 dogs is dying of cancer), we should be paying closer attention to the carcinogens in food. As cited by Armaiti May, DVM at the hearing on November 28, 2017:

An Environmental Working Group study reported in 2008 tested pooled blood and urine samples from 20 dogs and 37 cats at a Virginia veterinary clinic and found them contaminated with 48 of 70 industrial chemicals tested. 43 were at levels substantially higher than found in people, per national CDC and EWG guidelines. They included plastics, food packaging chemicals, heavy metals, fire retardants and stain-proofing chemicals. Dogs’ blood and urine samples were found to be contaminated with 35 chemicals altogether, including 11 carcinogens, 31 chemicals toxic to the reproductive system, and 24 neurotoxins. Seven (20%) of the chemicals averaged at least 5 times higher than found in people. Another 7 averaged up to 5 x more. Stain and grease-proof coatings (perfluorochemicals) were 2.4 x more than us.

Also cited by Armaiti May, DVM:

Another study of heavy metals found in pet foods reported in Spectroscopy Magazine in Jan. 2011 compared 31 dry and 27 wet dog and cat foods ranging from bargain products to high end ones and found that the average dry dog food had alarmingly high levels of mercury (over 120 times the reference dosage limit established as guideline for humans by the EPA) as well as levels of vanadium, uranium, cadmium and thallium which greatly exceeded the RDL guidelines.

All veterinarians can agree that no animal should eat food with such high levels of contaminants. There is nothing natural about dogs being kept in houses, eating kibble/canned food, and being fed at regular intervals either twice a day or ad libitum. Modern, omnivorous, domesticated dogs receive vaccinations, are spayed or neutered, have teeth cleanings, and are walked on a leash. Clearly, society ceased trying to keep dogs in their “natural” state long ago. Rather than trying to replicate an ill-defined, nostalgic idea of “natural,” we should make decisions based upon scientific research, evaluating what diet best serves the health of our canine companions as well as what is sustainable for this planet and future generations.

Scientific evidence suggests that well-balanced plant-based diets can actually reverse a number of chronic conditions seen in our canine patients (food allergies, arthritis, diabetes, and decreased levels of obesity to name a few). See Gentle World. Good Nutrition for Healthy Vegan Dogs. Available online: <http://www.webcitation.org/6ineIZmNQ> (accessed on 7 June 2016). Also see Peden, J. Vegetarian Cats and Dogs, 3rd ed.; Harbingers of a New Age: Troy, MT, USA, 1999.

Domestic dogs have lived alongside humans for the past 33,000 years. During this time, they have evolved from carnivorous wolves into omnivorous dogs. (The genomic signature of dog domestication reveals adaption to a starch-rich diet. *Nature*, 2013: doi:10.1038/nature11837, 2013). This study showed that dogs carry extra genes for amylase, for digesting starch, as compared to their wolf ancestors. The current Canidae diet used by the LA shelters contains a large quantity of its nutrients from plant-based ingredients. Clearly, we all agree that dogs can digest these ingredients and absorb necessary nutrients.

You stated: *The unknown consequences of changes of this nature could lead to sicker animals...higher return rate to shelter, higher morbidity, and possibly higher mortality.* Please provide studies to demonstrate such adverse results when feeding appropriate plant-based diets to dogs. We would argue that both meat-based and plant-based diets can be dangerous for dogs IF they are not well balanced, do not meet AAFCO standards for the life-stage being fed, and if the feed company does not conduct regular tests on the food post production to ensure that the food meets the stated nutritional levels. There have been numerous instances of pet food companies having to recall meat-based foods for problems such as contamination with aflatoxin, excessive vitamin D3, excessive methionine, inadequate thiamine, and melamine contamination. There were 11 of these recalls in the US between 1996 and 2010. There is no evidence to substantiate the claim that these incidents are more common with plant-based foods.

We agree that the licensed shelter veterinarians should have the discretion to prescribe specific diets (whether plant or meat-based) to dogs as unique situations arise. However, we think that it is completely reasonable and desirable for the majority of adult dogs within the LA shelter system, to be switched over to a plant-based diet. The scientifically demonstrable health benefits to the dogs, the enormous reduction of greenhouse gasses and impact on climate change, including saving at least 500 million gallons of water each year (in LA alone from producing dog food), as well as the elimination of suffering for thousands of animals currently being raised and fed to shelter dogs, make the path clear. We hope you will investigate the large volume of scientific data supporting this proposal. It is clear to us that we share the ultimate goal of achieving the best possible health and care for LA shelter dogs.

Respectfully,

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