



**Investigation into the Operations and Oversight
of the Veterinary Regulations Directorate (VRD)
Regarding Allegations of Animal Neglect
and Sub-standard Animal Care at
MCAST Centre of Agriculture, Aquatics, and Animal Sciences.**

Report Date : 27th October 2023

Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare



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Background and context

On the 30th of May 2023, the Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW) office received an anonymous report alleging severe neglect of farm animals at the MCAST Centre of Agriculture, Aquatics, and Animal Sciences.

CAW Inspection and Verification

Given that the site in question is accessible to the general public, on the 31st of May 2023, CAW conducted an on-site inspection to verify the anonymous report. Regrettably, the inspection validated the concerns raised by the anonymous reporter, revealing that the conditions at MCAST were significantly below acceptable standards for animal care and husbandry. (Inspection photos : Annex 2)

Summary of AW issues identified by CAW

1. Rooster-to-Hen Ratio- CAW observed an imbalance with approximately 10 roosters and only 11 hens present. This ratio imbalance can lead to rooster fights, stress among hens, and excessive mating, resulting in hens developing bald areas prone to injury.
2. Food and Water Management- Food scattered on the floor and improperly managed water, left in direct sunlight, led to inadequate water consumption, especially during hot weather conditions.
3. Improper Waste Disposal- CAW discovered garbage bags on-site containing deceased rabbits, posing health risks, and contravening sanitary practices.



4. Inadequate Shelter and Waste Management - Lack of suitable shelter for animals and a site filled with waste materials, reflecting neglect of fundamental aspects of animal welfare.

CAW requests inspection by the Veterinary Regulations Directorate

Given that the Veterinary Regulations Directorate (VRD) is the legal regulatory body for farm animals, on the 31st of May 2023, CAW requested that the VRD conduct an independent inspection. This was conducted 12 days later on the 12th June, 2023, by Dr Sara Boccuni and Ms Silvania Cassar Gauci from the Veterinary Regulation Directorate in the presence of Mr Malcolm Borg, Director (Mcast - Institute of Applied Sciences, Centre of Agriculture, Aquatics and Animal Sciences).

Initiation of CAW Investigation

Following the VRD inspection, CAW requested an update including findings and a list of changes/improvements that the VRD requested from MCAST. Still, despite CAW's multiple requests for information, no response was forthcoming. Consequently, on the 14th of July, CAW was compelled to initiate an investigation under Article 44a of Cap 439 to obtain said information from the VRD.



VRD's reply to CAW's investigation requests

On the 17th of July, the Veterinary Regulations Directorate (VRD) furnished the Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW) with its findings, accompanied by a comprehensive list of requested modifications and enhancements to be implemented by MCAST within a stipulated 30-day timeframe. (Report attached: Annex 1)

Summary of VRD's findings

1. A chicken coop was inspected. Approximately 20 chickens were present with a ratio of 1:1 males and females.
2. The dedicated area was delimited only by wire mesh; partial shade was granted with green shade cloth.
3. Flooring is only covered in soil.
4. Watering was granted through a piped system that gets water from a borehole, which is then stored in a tank. Tank, however, is placed in the sun.
5. Commercial feed is only administered using circular feeders or directly on the floor.
6. The art of the enclosure was not being used. In another area unnecessary objects (such as empty food bags, broken feeders, wooden poles etc) were present.
7. Only 3 nests were available, and eggs were instead being laid on the floor in random areas.
8. The veterinarian didn't visit recently, and no antiparasitic or other treatments were administered.
9. Severe feather pecking was observed with many animals showing damage to the tail, and others also to the neck, wings and back.
10. Pecking of wattles and combs was also observed during the inspection.



Summary of VRD's instructions to MCAST

VRD requested that MCAST Centre of Agriculture, Aquatics, and Animal Sciences to implement the following changes within 30 days:

1. Housing must be improved: no adequate shading or protection from elements is currently granted.
2. A wooden structure with an adequate amount of nests is recommended.
3. Please ensure adequate ventilation.
4. Feeding methods need to be improved both for contamination and competition issues.
5. Group housing: many adult males should not be housed together, highly competing for mating and dominance.
6. Pecked, injured and weak birds must be immediately moved to a separate enclosure.
7. Pest control: Rodents must be effectively prevented from entering the area.
8. Enrichment: Adequate enrichment, such as perches, must be introduced.



CAW's investigative conclusion

The Veterinary Regulation Directorate (VRD) independent findings aligned with those reported by CAW. The recommended changes requested by VRD also closely mirrored the observations made by CAW, further solidifying the urgency of addressing the issues at MCAST.

Regrettably, despite CAW's persistent efforts to obtain a final update from VRD, specifically seeking assurance that the requested changes have been implemented, no such confirmation has been received to date. However, a follow-up inspection by CAW can confirm that the changes and improvements have, in fact, been affected by MCAST.

Commissioner's recommendation

The need for more transparency and timely reactivity from VRD is crucial to ensure effective communication and alignment between all parties involved.

Furthermore, it is highly recommended that additional human and other resources be allocated to VRD to enhance their capacity for conducting inspections in a more timely manner. In some cases, like the one at hand, where a 12-day delay can have life-or-death implications, such resources are paramount to ensuring the welfare and safety of animals.



Final remarks

MCAST's programs aim to do more than just teach technical knowledge; they also strive to instil values of responsibility and compassion in students. The institution's offerings are designed to set an example of the highest standards of animal welfare. Therefore, the troubling situation that necessitated the intervention of CAW and VRD, starkly contradicts the fundamental principles on which MCAST's programs are based. This discrepancy casts a gloomy shadow over the institution's educational mission, undermining its commitment to nurturing responsible and compassionate individuals.

Ms. Alison Bezzina (MA Lond)
Commissioner for Animal Welfare



ANNEXES

Annex 1 - VRD inspection report

Annex 2 – On site photos taken on CAW's first inspection 31st May 2023