

## **Research and Development Programme for the Agria and Swedish Kennel Club Research Fund for Companion Animals 2024-2025**

### **Background**

In 2008, Agria Djurförsäkring (Agria) and the Swedish Kennel Club (SKK) decided to coordinate their research funds for companion animals (pets). Since 2010, the funds have been jointly administered through SKK's offices, a research committee with external representatives that assesses the research applications, and a steering group that manages cooperative efforts. The funds jointly publish calls for proposals for funding and share an electronic application system.

### **Purpose and goals**

The purpose of the Agria and SKK Research Fund is to promote high-quality scientific research relating to dogs, cats and other small companion animals in areas prioritised by the Fund. The Fund prioritises research into the physical and mental health of companion animals, as well as their social and economic importance for humans and society.

The overall aim is to contribute to increased animal welfare, increased value creation and development for the entire companion animal sector by generating new knowledge.

One of the goals for projects granted funding is for their research findings to be put to practical use and to provide favourable conditions for better animal health and animal husbandry, as well as knowledge of measures that enable work with injury prevention. Another goal is to strengthen the relationship between animals, humans and society. This can be achieved by the research findings contributing to the creation of knowledge, being put to practical use, and providing increased understanding of the importance of companion animals in improving the health of people through interaction with animals, and the positive effects that this has on the individual and society as a whole.

### **Call for proposals, application preparation, assessment criteria and communication**

Instructions regarding calls for proposals, the application procedure, assessment criteria, communication and other formalities are provided in the Research Fund's *Handbook for applicants*, which is available in both Swedish and English.

### **The research and development programme's three subareas and priorities**

Traditionally, research has prioritised areas such as health, feeding and reproduction

where companion animals are concerned. Today, there is a broader focus. Knowledge of the increased importance of companion animals in society has led to important new research areas, such as the relationship between humans and animals and the economic importance of companion animals in society.

The three research areas are:

- The physical and mental health, performance and welfare of companion animals
- The breeding and rearing of companion animals
- The role of companion animals for humans and society

### **Priority areas 2024-2025**

For the years in question, the Fund has chosen to prioritise research relating to cats in all three research areas, as well as the entire research area The importance of companion animals for humans and society, regardless of animal species.

In addition to pure research projects, the Fund is also interested in systematic surveys and meta-analyses in order to collate the literature available in the three aforementioned research areas.

### ***The physical and mental health, performance and welfare of companion animals***

Diseases that affect the health of companion animals are common. There are significant variations between different dog breeds in the incidence and type of diseases that affect them. There are breed variations in cats too, although this has been inadequately investigated. Further investigation of breed-specific diseases in dogs and cats, as well as increased knowledge of environmental and genetic factors that govern and influence the emergence of diseases in companion animals, are areas where there is a considerable need for research. Studies on new associations between diseases and genes should also be encouraged.

The relationship between environment and symptoms of disease in cats requires further study. This is the case for both gastrointestinal symptoms and certain respiratory symptoms that can be caused by high population density and high infection pressure. Too many individuals together, but also fewer individuals that do not get along, leads to stress, discord, reduced immunity, and so on.

### **Teeth**

Good oral health and good dental care for animals are important factors for the health of companion animals that need addressing. Dental diseases in both dogs and cats are common and cause unnecessary suffering. For example, tooth resorption (TR) is a very painful condition in cats.

### **Gastrointestinal tract**

Gastrointestinal diseases are a major problem in companion animals and one of the most common reasons

for visits to the vet. There can be many causes, with issues varying from harmless gastroenteritis to life-threatening conditions. Treatment with faecal microbiota transplantation (FMT) for gastrointestinal problems is becoming increasingly common, but there is a lack of scientific evaluation, especially for cats. Parasites of cats in connection with gastrointestinal diseases requires further investigation.

### **Feline infectious peritonitis**

In cats, feline coronavirus is a common cause of disease affecting the digestive system, although a mutated coronavirus causes symptoms from several different organs and death in cases of feline infectious peritonitis (FIP). Research on underlying factors as well as preventive measures is still needed, even though the disease has been in the spotlight for some time. Happily, there are new drugs on the market with promising results. These are not yet registered in Sweden. Despite the fact that the treatment is frequently used both internationally and nationally, more knowledge is still needed about it.

### **Skin**

Skin diseases in companion animals are very common and often distressing for the animals affected. They can be difficult to diagnose and frequently the underlying factors are not fully understood. Therefore, the study and investigation of this group of problems is very important.

### **Musculoskeletal system**

Causes of injuries to bones and joints is an important area of research, as is the need for evidence-based methods for rehabilitation. It is especially important for working dogs, such as hunting dogs, draught dogs and pastoral dogs, to have an efficient and sturdy musculoskeletal system. There is a need for more knowledge of injury prevention measures that increase strength through, for example, well-developed and adapted training. Evaluation of health programmes for bone and joint diseases, including the vertebral column, is desirable. Objective motion analysis for companion animals may be one way to promote better welfare.

### **Tumours**

Our companion animals are getting older and with increasing age comes an increased risk of tumour disorders. More than half of all dogs over the age of 10 years are diagnosed with cancer. Increased knowledge about the most common tumour disorders is vital. Treatment methods for tumour disorders are developing rapidly, but there are few follow-up studies that show the value of these treatments.

### **Reproduction**

An important prerequisite for the successful rearing of healthy and sound companion animals is good fertility performance. As natural selection has been replaced by human breeding selection, great emphasis must be placed on the use

of breeding animals that pass on good fertility performance, from mating to the care of offspring. It is therefore desirable to identify the genetic and environmental factors underlying good health in the reproductive system and good reproductive capacity, as well as deviations from these factors. Of particular note is increased knowledge of the factors underlying difficulties in giving birth naturally and where the goal is to reduce the number of difficult births (dystocia). Uterine inflammation is a disease that affects almost one in four bitches. Most often, it is middle-aged and older dogs that are affected, which often means that the dog has already been used for breeding. Here, more knowledge is needed to reduce the frequency of cases in the long term.

### **Neurological disorders**

Dogs and cats can suffer from many different disorders of the nervous system. For example, epilepsy and herniated discs are common problems. More research is needed to be able to make the right diagnosis more quickly and to initiate the right treatment in dogs and cats with neurological injuries and disorders.

### **Eyes**

Eye disorders are common in our pets and is an area where more knowledge about causes and treatments is required. For example, the genetic cause of many variants of Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA) is still unknown.

### **Geriatrics**

Our companion animals are getting older. Research on the welfare and care needs of older animals in combination with ethical stances is needed. An important area of research is to identify treatable symptoms in time and to alleviate geriatric symptoms.

### **Genetics**

The rapid development of genetic engineering is important for breeding work but requires evaluation of the tests that are offered commercially. Continued research into genes that have a significant impact on the function and health of companion animals is important. Studies on new associations between diseases and genes should also be encouraged.

### **Feeding**

The nutrition of our companion animals is important for the function and health of animals throughout their lives. Knowledge of the changing nutritional requirements of animals at different stages of life and for different activities needs to be improved. Studies of diseases that are caused by improper feeding are important in reducing animal suffering, such as deficiency diseases and animals becoming overweight and obese.

### **Mentality**

Greater understanding of the mentality and behaviour of companion animals is required. In particular, knowledge of the factors that are important for the development of mentally sound dogs is an area where more research is needed.

### **Treatment evaluation**

As veterinary medicine develops, new surgical and medical treatment methods, as well as new diagnostic methods, are emerging. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of follow-up studies, which makes this type of research extremely important.

### ***The breeding and rearing of companion animals***

A neglected area of research in dogs and cats is what traits make them a good mother

to their young, and how these traits are inherited and thus affect the physical and mental characteristics of the young later in life.

Given the growing trend of neutering male dogs and bitches for non-medical reasons, it is desirable to encourage studies that establish how castration affects the mentality and physical health of dogs. It is also equally important to determine whether castration has the effect that the animal owners are looking for with the procedure.

Other areas of considerable interest in breeding and rearing are:

- Comparisons between genetic coefficients of inbreeding and traditional pedigree-based inbreeding.
- Examine how different external traits correlate to different health characteristics and performance.
- Pedagogically illustrate the 'thresholds' that have been applied in the selection of breeding animals. What is breeding work based on in practice? For what reasons are breeding animals excluded?
- Is a dog that has show awards used in breeding more often than one that does not have show awards?
- Breeding for longevity.

### ***The role of companion animals for humans and society***

For thousands of years, humans have lived with dogs and cats. These animals have protected us, guarded and herded livestock, combated pests and participated in hunting. They have also played an important cultural role in myths, fables, rituals, and art. Archaeologists have shown that animals have long been companions, company and our best friends – a role that has become even more central in modern society.

Companion animals are important for our health and our well-being. They have started to be used in education, health care and social care. Animals have a cultural significance today too: they appear in literature, art, film and popular culture. These cultural expressions reflect our view of animals and nature, and our understanding of

ourselves as human beings. Companion animals are affected by their cultural status – there are trends in dog breeds, training methods and animal husbandry, which in turn have an impact on breeding and animal welfare.

Research in the field of humanities and social sciences is necessary to gain a better understanding of the importance of companion animals for both the individual and for society at large, and thus increase the acceptance of companion animals in society. Research into the humanities and social sciences can also identify norms and values that affect how we view and treat our companion animals.

Animals are playing an increasingly important and broader role in society, and their importance for human health and well-being is well documented. A number of studies, both Swedish and international, show the psychological, social and economic significance of companion animals. When it comes to working dogs – which can be divided into traditional working dogs and social service dogs – there is a lack of corresponding research. What role do working dogs play in different organisational contexts? How is the work of social service dogs evaluated from the perspective of users and society?

#### Examples of research areas:

- Interaction between humans and companion animals
- Ethical issues relating to animal husbandry and training
- Companion animals in health care, education and social care
- The importance of companion animals for human health and lifestyle – and the impact of humans on animal health, behaviour and well-being
- The importance of companion animals for human recreation and leisure
- The role of animals in organisations, such as health care, the police and the armed forces
- Animal welfare in working dogs
- The socioeconomic importance of companion animals
- Health economics linked to companion animals or to social service dogs.

#### ***Relevant funds***

##### ***Agria's Research Fund***

Agria's Research Fund was founded in 1938 with the aim of promoting research for the benefit of companion animals, horses, farm animals and crops. Through the Research Fund, Agria works to enhance animal health and improve animal husbandry, but also to provide peace of mind for animals and their owners.

Agria's Research Fund only finances research projects that benefit the animal species concerned. The animals must never be subjected to suffering and no animal may be subjected to unnecessary or painful animal testing.

The aim is to support veterinary medicine research and research and development projects relating to pets and pet care. This could be anything from the care of

companion animals to providing support for investigations and studies that lead to injury prevention measures. The Fund will also contribute to research on the role and importance of animals in society and how interaction with animals can contribute to improved health in humans.

Agria's Research Fund contributes allocated research funds for companion animals to the collaboration on the Agria and SKK Research Fund. Research funds can be applied for by researchers who work in one of the countries where Agria operates and where calls for proposals for research funds take place.

***Bertil Lagerblad's Research Fund***

The purpose of the fund is to promote research in the areas that relate to dogs, primarily in veterinary medicine, genetics and ethology, but also research on the mental, social and economic importance of dogs to man. Particular attention should be paid to hunting dogs.

***The Ulla Segerström and Bertil Sted-Gren Foundation Fund***

The purpose of the fund is to promote scientific research on dogs.

***The Swedish Kennel Club's Research Fund***

The purpose of the fund is to promote research in the areas that relate to dogs, veterinary medicine, genetics and ethology, but also mental, social and economic importance, as well as the historical and cultural significance of dogs. Particular attention should be paid to the health of dogs and the opportunities to breed and keep dogs in Sweden.

***Marina Reuterswärd's Fund***

The Marina Reuterswärd's Fund was established in 2023 and allocates funds for research on cancer in dogs.

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