



Canadian Food  
Inspection Agency

Agence canadienne  
d'inspection des aliments

# Public Opinion Research with Canadians on Pet Trade 2022/2023

## Summary

### Prepared for Canadian Food Inspection Agency

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Canada 

# Public Opinion Research with Canadians on Pet Trade 2022/2023

## Summary

### Prepared for Canadian Food Inspection Agency

**Supplier name:** EKOS Research Associates Inc.

**Date:** March 31 2023

This report presents the results of an online survey conducted by EKOS Research Associates Inc. on behalf of Canadian Food Inspection Agency. This research was conducted between January 23 to February 14, 2023. This research consisted of an online survey with 2,076 Canadians, as well as focus groups with the public and pet owners, and in-depth interviews with individuals involved in commercial dog imports (for example, breeders, veterinarians, and animal welfare organizations).

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# SUMMARY

## A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is responsible for mitigating the risk of introduction and spread of certain animal diseases that could negatively impact both human health and animal health. Animal imports are one avenue in which diseases can enter and spread in Canada. The CFIA has increased its focus on dog imports, as there has been an increase in significant issues related to dog imports, such as non-compliances with humane transportation requirements and cases of canine-variant rabies (dog rabies) being introduced into Canada. A new temporary measure that prohibits the importation of commercial dogs into Canada from countries at high-risk for dog rabies came into effect on September 28, 2022, with plans for expansion to apply additional conditions for importing personal pet dogs and assistance dogs from these countries. This research will support the CFIA in identifying areas that are of concern to the public and opportunities to improve outreach related to both dog and pet imports, as the CFIA continues to evaluate options for long term strategies.

Based on the volume, frequency, and types of questions received by both the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the CFIA, there is also a need to expand on communications about pet<sup>1</sup> imports and exports as a whole. The objective of this research is to develop a better understanding of audiences who are involved in the pet trade (import/exports): such as an individual's decision-making journey when adopting or purchasing a pet from abroad; individuals who travel with their pets or bring their pets to Canada; and the role that commercial importers (such as breeders, resellers, and animal welfare organizations) play in this broader ecosystem. This research also helps the CFIA identify and test key messages for future communications products.

Results will aid in the development of future communications tools and outreach campaigns as well as inform future policy and programs related to pet imports and exports.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this research, the term "pets" is used in replacement of the term "certain regulated non-livestock animals, which includes companion animal and exotic species".

## B. METHODOLOGY

This research involved an online survey of 2,076 Canadians, as well as focus groups with the public and pet owners, and in-depth interviews with individuals involved in commercial dog imports (for example, breeders, veterinarians, and animal welfare organizations). The survey results can be considered representative of the Canadian general public, and are valid within a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Following data collection, the data from this survey were statistically weighted by age, gender, region, education, and dog ownership to ensure the sample is representative of the Canadian population according to 2021 Census data.

Differences noted underneath charts are statistically significant differences.

For the qualitative wave (focus groups and in-depth interviews) it should be noted that qualitative results are not generalizable to the broader population. Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is supported by evidence or shared by others. In some instances language such as many, some, or few is used to help provide directional context for the reader. It is not intended to quantify the findings.

Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.

Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real-world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

Appendix A contains a detailed description of the methodology used in this study.

Appendix B contains the full survey questionnaire.

Appendix C contains the focus group screening questionnaire.

Appendix D contains the focus group guide.

Appendix E contains the in-depth interview guide.

## C. QUANTITATIVE KEY FINDINGS

Outlined below are key findings from the online survey. The remainder of this report describes survey results in more detail.

### **Pet ownership**

Results reveal that many Canadians own pets. 56% of survey respondents indicated they own a pet, while 44% said they did not. Those who own pets were asked what type of pet(s) they own. Most indicated that they own dogs (62%) or cats (53%).

Canadians who own pets were asked where they acquired their pet. 28% indicated a Canadian breeder, followed by an animal welfare/rescue organization (24%), or a Humane Society/Canadian shelter (21%).

Results suggest that Canadians undertake limited research before acquiring a pet. Just under half (49%) indicated they researched the organization/source from which they acquired their pet to a great extent, and 1 in 3 (33%) researched the organization/source to only a little extent.

Those who own a pet were asked the origin of their pet. Results suggest that most pets are born in Canada (83%), however a sizeable minority were born outside of Canada and then brought into the country by someone else (9%), or acquired directly from another country (6%).

Those who acquired their pet directly from another country were asked where they found information on requirements for bringing their pet(s) into Canada. Government websites were mentioned most often (57%), followed fairly distantly by a web search engine (20%), calling a government agency (18%), or an animal welfare/rescue organization (18%).

### **Consideration of a new pet**

Respondents were asked if they were considering getting a pet in the next year. About 1 in 4 (23%) said yes, while two thirds (64%) indicated no. Those considering getting a pet in the next year were asked whether they think they will get a pet born in Canada, or one that is born in another country and then brought into Canada before adopting it. Most (74%) say they will get a Canadian born animal, however, a fairly large proportion (22%) are unsure.

Those who believe they will acquire their pet from outside the country were asked where they would look for information about bringing a pet into Canada. Most of these respondents indicated they would get this information from a government website or an animal welfare/rescue organization.

### **Travelling with pet(s)**

All pet owners were asked if they had ever travelled outside of Canada with their pet(s). The majority of pet owners (83%) indicate they have not travelled abroad with their pet(s), while about 1 in 6 (17%) say they have.

Those who travelled outside Canada with their pet(s) were asked how often they travel with their pet(s). Most (41%) have only travelled once or twice since they have owned their pet(s), although a fairly large proportion (20%) say they travel more than 3 times per year with their pet(s), and a further 15% say they travel 2-3 times per year with their pet(s). The United States is mentioned most often (89%) as the country to which these respondents travelled, followed distantly by Mexico (5%), and the Bahamas (2%).

All pet owners were asked to rate their awareness of requirements regarding travelling with pet(s). Results suggest Canadian pet owners feel they are generally knowledgeable about these requirements. More than half (56%) say they are very aware that if they travel with a pet they will need to meet specific requirements to bring the animal into the country they are visiting, and 51% say they are very aware that they will also need to meet specific requirements when bringing the animal back into Canada.

### **Bringing pets into Canada**

All respondents were asked to rate their understanding of the regulations and requirements for bringing pets into Canada. Results reveal limited awareness of these requirements (although awareness is significantly higher among pet/dog owners). Overall, only 1 in 4 (24%) indicate they understand these requirements, while 49% indicate little understanding of these requirements. However, 38% of dog owners, and a clear majority (72%) of those who acquired their pet directly from another country indicate awareness of these requirements.

Canadians generally feel primary responsibility for ensuring that pets brought into Canada are healthy and free of animal disease rests with the individual/organization that brings the animal into Canada (48%). The government is seen as having somewhat lower responsibility (29%), and the individual adopting the pet is assigned lowest responsibility (18%).

When asked which government departments should be consulted when bringing pets into Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency is mentioned most often (81%), followed distantly by the Public Health Agency of Canada (32%), and provincial government departments (26%). Interestingly, the CFIA is fairly low on the list of departments to check (17%), however, this rises to 34% among those who acquired their pet directly from another country.

### **Views on rabies/animal diseases**

Respondents were provided with information about rabies and then asked how concerned they were about dog rabies getting into Canada. Interestingly, despite being informed that globally dog rabies kills 59,000 people every year, and that it is prevalent in over 100 countries, fewer than half of Canadians (46%) are concerned about rabies entering the country, and 1 in 3 (32%) express little concern about this possibility.

Respondents were also informed that the Canadian government had recently introduced a new measure that prohibits commercial dogs from countries at high-risk for dog rabies from entering Canada, and asked if they were aware of this new measure. Results reveal limited awareness of this new measure: 8 in 10 (79%) are not aware of it, while only 1 in 5 (20%) say they are aware.

Despite limited awareness of this new measure, when asked if they support or oppose this new measure 70% of Canadians support this regulation, and only 1 in 10 (9%) oppose it.

When asked to identify the reasons for supporting this measure, the health of pets, wildlife, and animals in general (14%), and protecting human health (13%) were mentioned most often.

All respondents were also asked how important they think it is that the Government of Canada prevent the entry of serious/infectious animal diseases that are not currently in Canada. Results reveal that the vast majority of Canadians (88%) assign high importance to this issue, and very few (3%) view this as being of little importance.

Results are more mixed in terms of belief in the government's ability to actually prevent the entry of serious/infectious animal diseases into Canada. Only 4 in 10 (42%) express confidence in the government's ability to prevent the entry of serious animal diseases into Canada, and almost 3 in 10 (27%) express little confidence in the government's ability to do this.

## **Awareness and use of the CFIA website**

When asked if they were aware that the CFIA's website has information for bringing animals/pets into Canada, three quarters of Canadians (73%) indicated they were unaware of the website. 1 in 5 (22%) indicated they were aware of the site but have never used it, and only 5% have used the website. However, awareness/use of the CFIA website is significantly higher among dog owners (36%), and those who acquired their pet directly (58%) or indirectly (36%) from another country.

Those who have used the CFIA website were asked to rate the usefulness of the site in helping find information about the requirements for importing animals/pets. The majority of these respondents (73%) indicated they found the site to be helpful, and only 14% thought the site was of little help in finding information about importing pets into Canada. And notably, 94% of those who acquired their pet from another country felt the CFIA website was helpful.

## **Awareness of Government of Canada advertising**

All respondents were asked if they had seen, read, or heard any Government of Canada advertising about adopting or purchasing a pet. The vast majority of indicated they had not been exposed to this advertising (95%).

Among those who indicated they had seen Government of Canada advertising about adopting or purchasing a pet, most indicated they had seen the ads on television (38%), or Facebook (30%).

The majority of respondents who saw the ads indicated that they did not take action as a result of seeing the ads (87%), and only about 1 in 8 (13%) said they did take action as a result of the advertising.

Despite the limited reach and impact of the advertising, views on the ads are generally positive, with 8 in 10 indicating the ads talk about an important topic, and 7 in 10 agreeing that the ads provided new information, and caught their attention.

## **D. QUALITATIVE KEY FINDINGS**

Outlined below are key findings from the focus groups and in-depth interviews. The remainder of this report describes qualitative results in more detail.



## Focus groups

Focus group participants agree that it is important to consider where a dog is acquired, with a priority placed on obtaining a dog from local sources, and that prior to acquiring a dog, it is important to understand the dog's history, characteristics of the dog or breed, and health information. The opportunity to foster a dog, or talk to the dog's foster, is also seen as helpful before making a decision.

Many participants felt that there is less opportunity to investigate these factors when acquiring a dog from another country. The risk of disease, and travel stress for the dog, along with the abundant availability of dogs in Canada for rescue or adoption, were also mentioned as potential reasons for not acquiring a dog from abroad.

Very few focus group participants have experience with the requirements and procedures for bringing a dog into Canada. Few had accessed the CFIA website to look for information about requirements; however, those who had accessed the CFIA website were able to obtain the necessary information.

Some focus group participants were aware of recent cases of rabies but very few have heard about canine-variant rabies (dog rabies). There was limited concern about the spread of rabies as focus group participants felt that rabies is very rare. A few talked about government measures to distribute vaccination packets to wildlife or prevent dog rabies.

There is moderate awareness of recent measures to prevent dog rabies from entering Canada among focus group participants. Many participants support the measures to prohibit commercial dogs from entering Canada who originate from countries at high-risk for dog rabies. Some who supported it also offered modifications to these measures such as quarantining a dog or producing historical records of rabies vaccination, rather than an outright prohibition.

5 examples of advertisements were presented to focus group participants that were used in previous international dog adoption campaigns. Participants were asked to provide feedback on various attributes of the advertisements.

- Some focus group participants felt the ads were clear in conveying the message about risks and the need to be informed when bringing in dogs from other countries. However, it was deemed that the message needs to be strong and specific. For example, the message is more impactful when "rabies" is specifically mentioned rather than "disease". Further, these participants felt that the message must include a clear call to action.

- When the message was not strong or specific, many participants felt that the ad did not command attention. Focus group participants were divided on whether the associated images should show a healthy or sick dog.
- Many focus group participants felt that a specific messaging approach such as “Rabies kills 59,000 people a year” would garner attention, however, some felt that this approach needs to be more specific such as adding the context of “worldwide”, or indicating how people can be infected with rabies. A few felt there would be benefits to making a CFIA reference more prominent as the authority responsible for regulating the entry of dogs into Canada.
- Focus group participants tended to prefer the ads with examples of questions to ask, or generally have greater clarity of messaging and a call to action.

### **In-depth interviews**

Interview participants indicated that the primary consideration when importing a dog to Canada is the health of the dog. This can be determined through proof of vaccination, health assessment by a veterinarian, and reputation of the welfare/rescue organization or breeder, according to participants. Information should also be obtained about the temperament of the dog, and potential health issues associated with the particular breed of dog.

When importing dogs from outside Canada, most participants were concerned about introducing diseases to other animals. Many participants agree that potential dog owners are apt to make emotional decisions when importing a dog from another country. Participants are divided on the need for importing dogs into Canada for adoption/rehoming; some feel the dogs may be living in poor conditions in other countries with few prospects so are in need of adoption, while others point out that there are many potential dogs in Canada in need of adoption, particularly in the North.

Many participants were familiar with canine variant rabies or dog rabies, along with the measure implemented in September 2022, to prohibit commercial dogs being imported into Canada from countries at high-risk for dog rabies. Many interview participants support the measure; however, some feel that it is not necessary as long as there are certificates of health or vaccine records available.

Some felt that it is ineffective to apply the measure only to commercial dogs, when other dogs, presented as personal dogs, may enter Canada with rabies. Alternatively, many participants were comfortable with personal dogs entering from countries at high-risk for dog rabies, as long as sufficient health records were available. Some participants support the use of a quarantine for dogs coming into Canada from high-risk countries, rather than a prohibition.

Some participants also pointed out that there are diseases prevalent in dogs in other countries aside from rabies that are of concern when bringing a dog to Canada.

Interview participants felt that the CFIA may help provide education, tools and information to the industry and pet owners regarding factors to consider when bringing an animal to Canada. Most participants felt that fraudulent paperwork is a concern, although difficult to mitigate. Suggestions to address this included the creation of standardized documentation and a microchip requirement for all dogs. Individuals presenting non-compliant animals at a border should be denied entry, according to most interview participants, with many supporting a ban to the importer on future attempts to enter Canada, along with a fine. Most interview participants support the use of a classification system to identify reputable importers, allowing them to bring dogs into the country, even from higher risk countries.

## **Conclusions**

Results from this study point to a need for public education given that many pet owners acquire (or may acquire) dogs from outside of Canada, yet Canadians have limited understanding of the requirements for bringing pets into Canada (although understanding of these requirements is higher among those who acquired their pet from outside the country).

Survey results reveal limited awareness and use of the CFIA website containing information for bringing animals/pets into Canada. However, awareness/use of the CFIA website is significantly higher among those who acquired their pet directly or indirectly from another country. Findings also reveal that the majority of those who have used the website found the site to be helpful, with 94% of those who acquired their pet from another country indicating the CFIA website was helpful. Qualitative findings reinforce these survey results. While few focus group participants had accessed the CFIA website to look for information about requirements, those who had accessed the website said they were able to obtain necessary information from the site.

Survey results reveal limited public concern about dog rabies entering Canada, and little awareness of a new Government of Canada measure prohibiting commercial dogs from countries at high-risk for dog rabies from entering Canada. However, despite limited concern about rabies entering the country, or awareness of this new measure, results reveal strong support for the measure. Qualitative results generally reinforce these survey findings. Most focus group and in-depth interview participants express limited concern about rabies, but support the measures to prohibit commercial dogs from entering Canada who originate from countries at high-risk for dog rabies. However, qualitative findings also reveal that some participants feel that a prohibition is not necessary as long as there are health certificates or

vaccine records available; while others prefer the use of a quarantine for dogs coming to Canada from high-risk countries, rather than an outright prohibition. A number of stakeholders argued for a focus on a broader array of diseases, rather than an exclusive focus on rabies.

Survey findings also indicate that Canadians strongly believe it is important that the Government of Canada prevent the entry of animal diseases into Canada, but express more mixed views in terms of belief in the government's ability to actually achieve this.

Survey results suggest that the CFIA is reaching its most important target audience (i.e., those who acquire their pets/dogs directly or indirectly from outside the country) with needed information about the requirements for bringing pets into Canada, but that the public as a whole, and pet owners whose pets were born in Canada, are less aware of this information. Given that a fairly large proportion of Canadians are considering getting a pet in the next year, and that many are unsure if they will acquire this pet from outside Canada, it is important to broaden the reach of this information and better communicate the resources CFIA has to help when bringing pets into Canada. This increased communication about requirements and resources for importing pets into the country might also help improve Canadians' confidence in government efforts to prevent serious animal diseases from entering Canada.

Increased communication from government is also mentioned by focus group and interview participants. Several focus group participants emphasized the need for education efforts to inform the public, and in particular dog owners and prospective dog owners, of the issues and considerations with regard to the various risks when bringing a dog into the country. And many in-depth interview participants felt the CFIA is well positioned to help provide education, tools and information to the industry and pet owners regarding factors to consider when bringing an animal to Canada. A few interview participants also felt the government should do a better job of consulting with industry before implementing new measures such as the recent prohibition on importing commercial dogs into Canada from countries at high-risk for dog rabies.

## **E. CONTRACT VALUE**

The contract value for the POR project is \$98,084.00 (including HST).

Supplier Name: EKOS Research Associates

PWGSC Contract Number: CW2252930

Contract Award Date: December 7, 2022

To obtain more information on this study, please contact CFIA at [cfia.inquiries-demandedereenseignements.acia@canada.ca](mailto:cfia.inquiries-demandedereenseignements.acia@canada.ca)

## F. POLITICAL NEUTRALITY CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of EKOS Research Associates Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity and the Directive on the Management of Communications.

Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed by:   
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Derek Jansen (Vice President)