

Regulation of Australian Agriculture – Productivity Commission Inquiry

Submission from the
Australian Veterinary Association



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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, livestock and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

Introduction

The Productivity Commission inquiry seeks to reduce regulatory barriers to productivity and profitability within the agricultural industries. The productivity of the animal agriculture industries is a key concern for veterinarians, particularly those providing essential services to the sector.

Major barriers to productivity include biosecurity breaches and disease incursions, as well as poor animal welfare. Effective regulation of biosecurity, animal welfare and the veterinary profession is essential to maximise productivity, food security and food safety, and to realise the government's goal of achieving a better return at the farm gate.

Agricultural and veterinary chemicals

AgVet chemical reforms

The AVA supports reforms to improve the efficiency and timeliness of evaluation, registration and approval of AgVet chemical products, provided due diligence in risk-assessment is exercised.

The AVA therefore supports the following moves to reduce the regulatory burden:

- recognition of assessments conducted by trusted foreign regulators and use of a risk-based assessment system to streamline chemical assessments, speeding the process to bring new medicines and chemicals to market.
- more consistent harmonisation of regulation across states and territories around permitted uses of AgVet chemicals, for example off-label use.

Further, a system of independent assessment of the reforms and their effectiveness in meeting the stated policy objectives may be helpful to identify implementation issues and possible solutions.

Risk-based decisions should include consideration of more than just human and environmental safety. The potential for residues to impact our international markets, and the potential for products to impact negatively on animal welfare should also be part of the risk-assessment process. Products that may have an adverse impact on animal welfare if used inappropriately must continue to be provided only via veterinary prescription.

Recommendation - Continued improvements to AgVet regulation should incorporate both food residue and animal welfare considerations when risk-based assessments are made.

Proposed APVMA relocation

As one of the key stakeholder organizations of the APVMA, the AVA does not support any proposed relocation of the APVMA away from its Canberra base. The APVMA's other major stakeholders include the livestock industry peak bodies, and product registrants and their representatives such as Animal Medicines Australia, which are all largely based in Canberra.

Moving the APVMA to regional centres risks loss of specialised scientists who will be very difficult to replace. Training new scientists in this specialised regulatory space may result in significant delays to the release of important new agricultural and veterinary treatments. This is likely to impact directly on animal health and welfare and thus farm gate profitability.

Recommendation – the APVMA should remain in Canberra where it is able to service the needs of the agricultural and veterinary industries most effectively.

Animal welfare

National development and harmonisation of standards

The community has an expectation that animals used in agriculture and food production will be humanely treated. Animal welfare standards provide an important mechanism for industry to demonstrate compliance and maintain consumer confidence in their products. However complying with multiple, inconsistent, regulatory regimes for animal welfare can increase costs for businesses operating across state and territory borders.

The aim of the former Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) was to bring a nationally consistent, science-based and rational approach to animal welfare policy reform, in order to:

- demonstrate high standards of animal welfare to our international trading partners to protect valuable export markets, and
- develop standards acceptable to the Australian domestic market, to minimise the risk to industry of criticism on animal welfare grounds and loss of consumer confidence.

The AAWS brought together a broad range of representation from the livestock industries, government, and not-for-profit groups and some good progress was made toward national harmonisation on this important issue.

Since the AAWS was discontinued, the lack of an inclusive framework risks the development of greater polarisation within the community, and loss of community confidence. In recent years, we have seen the major supermarkets dictate welfare standards to industry in response to community pressure. These standards are developed in an ad-hoc manner, are not generally science-based.

This is a risk to our livestock industries whose best defence is to demonstrate compliance with recognised, science based, balanced and enforceable animal welfare standards.

Inconsistencies in animal welfare legislation between states make it difficult for livestock industries to compete on a level playing field and impose a greater regulatory burden on stakeholders. For example, the varying state approaches to free range layer hen stocking densities are detrimental to competition in this sector and a source of consternation to egg producers. This is only one example of the potential problems when individual states develop animal welfare reforms in the absence of a national framework.

The solution is not to reduce regulation, and risk loss of community confidence, but rather to implement nationally-consistent animal welfare standards. This will provide certainty for investments in industry infrastructure, protect the reputation of industry and maintain essential consumer confidence.

Recommendation - The Australian government should re-commit to national leadership and the re-establishment of a national animal welfare framework that drives harmonisation and continued improvements in Australia's animal welfare standards.

Recommendation - In order to provide producer and animal access to appropriate animal health and welfare, acts of veterinary science should be strengthened and maintained (see final section re: veterinary regulation relevant to agricultural productivity).

Live export – Animal welfare

As well as attention to domestic animal welfare, the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance Scheme (ESCAS) for our live animal export industry should be maintained and strengthened to prevent loss of community support for the industry and to protect Australia's reputation in the international marketplace. Introduction of additional schemes such as LGAP should be closely monitored and independently assessed to determine whether tangible improvements in animal welfare are achieved.

Recommendation - ESCAS should be strengthened to ensure ongoing international community confidence. Independent assessment should be undertaken to determine effectiveness of live export regulations in improving animal welfare.

Live export – pregnancy diagnosis

Current regulations relating to pregnancy diagnosis of cattle for export do not adequately protect either animal welfare or our valuable export markets.

AVA through its special interest group Australian Cattle Veterinarians runs a PREgCHECK™ accreditation program, where registered veterinarians with experience in pregnancy diagnosis of at least 2000 cattle submit themselves to a strict peer review examination. Registered veterinarians making pregnancy diagnoses in cattle under this auditable scheme are responsible for the diagnoses they make, and can lose their accreditation in the event of complaints. PREgCHECK™ accredited veterinarians have the highest level of expertise and there is no other comparable recognized scheme or qualification in Australia.

It is essential that pregnancy diagnosis for the purposes of live export is correct. In order to minimise errors to the maximum extent possible, pregnancy diagnosis for this purpose should only be undertaken by PREgCHECK™ accredited veterinarians acting within the rules of that scheme.

The use of ultrasound machines by inexperienced operators can perforate the bowel as well as provide inaccurate diagnoses. Cattle determined not to be pregnant after ultrasound examination may need to be checked by manual rectal palpation to ensure that pregnant animals are not misdiagnosed. PREgCHECK™ accredited veterinarians take personal responsibility for the diagnoses they make. All PREgCHECK™ accredited veterinarians who use ultrasound are also accredited in manual pregnancy diagnosis. For both feeder and breeder cattle, not detecting their true reproductive status poses an unacceptable risk to animal welfare, industry reputation, and economic viability.

Australia's reputation should not be put in the hands of non-accredited individuals who, while they may believe that they have the appropriate skills to use an ultrasound satisfactorily, do not have formal accreditation, are not able to manually check cows diagnosed empty and are not registered with a scheme where they can lose accreditation for poor performance.

Recommendation – For both animal welfare and economic reasons, pregnancy diagnosis should only be undertaken by registered PREgCHECK™ accredited veterinarians acting within the rules of that scheme.

Biosecurity

Maintaining a robust biosecurity system is essential to providing assurances around our favourable pest and disease status and to protect our important export markets. Key to this is a cooperative approach between the Commonwealth and state and territory jurisdictions. As such, the Australian veterinary association supports the planned implementation in June 2016 of the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, which aims to introduce a more flexible, risk-based approach to biosecurity regulation. It is critical that this new legislation and supporting regulatory arrangements are established in such a way as to protect Australia from threats to its animal and plant industries.

Recommendation - In order to provide adequate veterinary surveillance and response to disease threats, acts of veterinary science should be strengthened and maintained (see final section re: veterinary regulation relevant to agricultural productivity).

Food labelling

Food labels seek to inform consumers about a product's characteristics, and it is essential that labels not be deceptive, misleading or confusing to potential buyers. Clearly it is important that statements around nutritional attributes or, for example, potential allergens are accurate. Equally so, any statements that make claims about the animal welfare conditions under which the product was produced must be reliable.

Country-of-origin labelling, which is mandatory in Australia, is supported as a first step in supplying consumers with assurances the animal welfare conditions generally imposed within Australia have been met. However without nationally consistent animal welfare standards that cover all types of food-animal production, it is hard to ensure consistency and truth in labelling in the present environment. Free range egg production is one such example where a lack of agreed animal welfare standards on which to base labelling has led to inconsistencies, misleading information and confusion for the consumer.

To this end the AVA supports the continued development of robust and enforceable animal welfare standards and subsequent development of labelling standards that align with them. This type of truth-in-labelling will create a level playing field for producers and allow individuals to differentiate their products for competitive advantage.

Recommendation - Food labelling that relates to animal welfare must align with science based and enforceable animal welfare standards that can be implemented with consistency across jurisdictions.

Veterinary regulation and agricultural productivity

The veterinary profession is currently regulated by states and territories, and this legislation is designed to protect the interests of both the consumers of veterinary services, and animals. Legislated "restricted acts of veterinary science" include making a diagnosis or performing invasive procedures on animals. They are restricted because of the inherent risks associated with these procedures - only a qualified veterinarian possesses the required level of training to perform them competently. However, inconsistency between states and territories' definitions of these restricted acts is having a detrimental impact on Australian agricultural industries.

In some states, deregulation has reduced the opportunity for veterinarians to visit farms, by allowing some routine services such as pregnancy diagnosis to be provided by non-veterinary lay providers. This decline in farm visits by vets has reduced opportunities to provide advice on herd-health, management and productivity, as well as provision of passive surveillance for notifiable diseases of economic importance. These are value-added

benefits that only a person with veterinary qualifications can provide. Animal welfare can also suffer where procedures such as equine dentistry, bovine pregnancy diagnosis and spaying are being undertaken by lay operators. In some rural areas, access to veterinary services has already been eroded by legislative changes to acts of veterinary science. This has resulted in reducing the number and distribution of viable veterinary practices in rural areas and access to agriculturally relevant veterinarians with current livestock skills and experience. The AVA argues that regulation of the veterinary profession needs to be harmonised nationally in the interests of animal welfare, disease surveillance and improved farm productivity.

Recommendation – Harmonisation of veterinary practice legislation should be addressed by AGMIN and encouraged by the Australian Government because of its impact on productivity and biosecurity.

Recommendation – Governments should not advocate deregulation of acts of veterinary science where the welfare of animals could be threatened by non-veterinarians undertaking the procedures.

Recommendation – Because of the increasingly critical role of private veterinarians in biosecurity and disease surveillance, the Australian government should ensure that harmonised veterinary practice legislation supports the role of veterinarians on farms. This includes retaining critical routine services such as cattle pregnancy diagnosis as veterinary-only procedures.