

Submission to the Regulation of Australian Agriculture 16 August 2016

I welcome the Australian Productivity Commission's inquiry into the regulation of Australian agriculture and I strongly support recommendations 5.1 and 5.2 of the recently released Draft Report, relating to the Regulation of farm animal welfare. The 'creation of a national, independent body responsible for building the evidence base on community expectations, as well as for developing national farm animal welfare standards' is to be applauded. It is an action that is well overdue.

There are currently too many, different agricultural regulations across federal and state levels, which is leaving the welfare of our exported livestock in a critical and vulnerable condition. We urgently need an independent and cohesive animal welfare body to develop animal welfare standards that are based on current animal welfare science and community expectations as well as overseeing the effectiveness of the live animal export regulation system and enforcement at both national and state levels.

To enable this, greater resources must be dedicated to animal welfare policy and enforcement at federal and state levels.

Our current ESCAS system, whilst improving somewhat the treatment of Australian animals exported overseas, only requires that facilities meet basic OIE standards - the level that OIE member countries should be meeting anyway. ESCAS does not require stunning, it permits the use of full inversion restraint boxes (boxes that turn the animal upside down before cutting their throat while fully conscious), government oversight of the system is fundamentally flawed and it does not mitigate in any way the animal welfare impact of long distance transportation. As explained earlier, the improvement is compared to a previous baseline where there were no standards at all. In this context, anything is an improvement. But the outcome for Australian animals is still worse than if they were slaughtered in Australia. Countries that receive Australian livestock need to have animal welfare standards that align with Australia and having an independent animal welfare body would enable this process to be monitored, potentially acting as a deterrent to international countries that ignore animal welfare standards.

There has been a huge and significant level of community opposition to the live export trade. Australian boxed meat exports on average over the last ten years have generated seven times more income annually than the live export industry. Boxed meat exports support employment in regional communities and maintain our clean, green reputation. Live exports do the opposite. A transition to a boxed meat-only future is more than viable and a much better alternative for animals, producers and our processing industry.

While live exports do provide an alternate market for producers, it is described as 'critical' to the producers and the regional economies by government and industry because it currently provides competition between exporters and processors. This situation has arisen out of a number of factors including increased overseas demand for beef but primarily due to a significant reduction in Australia's national herd ie the number of animals available for this purpose. The herd is at the lowest point recorded in decades, and this scarcity of supply combined with the increased demand is pushing prices higher than ever before. However it is important to note that just seven percent of all cattle and six per cent of sheep from Australia's total turn off are sent to live exports. Its 'essential' classification has resulted only from the present supply and demand model, which can and will change as the national herd slowly increases. The recent dramatic downgrade of quota numbers in the Indonesian market clearly reflects that the live export trade is volatile and unpredictable and cannot provide sustainable and stable economic support to communities.

An independent farm animal welfare body (as proposed in the draft report) would strengthen ESCAS, improve and oversee live export standards and enable the development of policies to expand the meat processing sector to help build a sustainable future for Australian livestock producers that no longer relies on live exports. These reforms will improve community and consumer confidence in Australian livestock industries and the government's commitment to animal welfare.

I quote the following words of Nobel Peace Prize Winner Albert Schweitzer (1952)... "Wherever any animal is forced into the service of man the sufferings which it has to bear on that account are the concern of every one of us. No one ought to permit, in so far as he can prevent it, pain or suffering for which he will not take the responsibility. No one ought to rest at ease in the thought that in so doing he would mix himself up in affairs, which are not his business. Let no one shirk the burden of his responsibility. When there is so much maltreatment of animals, when the cries of thirsting creatures go up unnoticed from the railway trucks, when there is so much roughness in our slaughterhouses, when in our kitchens so many animals suffer horrible deaths from unskillful hands, when animals endure unheard-of agonies from heartless men, or are delivered to the dreadful play of children, then we are all guilty and must bear the blame'.