

Live sheep export submission

As a sheep farmer, I would like to focus on the impacts to farmers which are already happening in WA due to the collapse in confidence in the WA sheep market. In summary:

- Our current mixed farming enterprise (sheep/wool/crops) is sustainable, environmentally friendly and resilient.
- To continue operating, we need a market for our young wethers.
- Our business has halted sheep breeding this year due to the market uncertainty, and we still have last year's stock unsold on farm.
- Outcomes of this decision include a possible end to wool/sheep production in WA, increased crop production with no capacity to handle the volume, adverse environmental impacts due to increased chemical use and monocultures, mental health issues, sheep welfare issues.
- WA is an export state – we export many resources, including agricultural and mineral products, as we do not have the population and infrastructure to process these resources locally.
- This decision is purely political, WA sheep farmers have been picked as a small sacrificial target, even though all of the improved export welfare standards have been met.
- How is a feedlot on a well-managed boat any different to the millions of sheep placed annually into feedlots before being processed in Australia?
- This decision will be the final nail in the coffin for many sheep farmers like us, with no viable alternatives.

Introduction – Mixed farming system

Our farm is a mixed sheep and cropping enterprise, an 1800 Ha property near [REDACTED] which has been family run since 1908. We take environmental management seriously, having one third of our property fenced off to native vegetation and wildlife. The remainder is managed using a farming system has been developed over many years. It works well for our land types, which are not all suitable for cropping. We have a sustainable farming system, in which we have minimised the amount of agricultural chemicals we use. It is also resilient, as we have multiple products – wool, meat and grain. This protects us from both climate and market variations. **Sheep play a vital role in this sustainable farming system.**

Markets

Our farming enterprise relies on the sale of our young wethers to allow us to breed our replacement stock each year. The federal government's announcement has already severely limited this market, to the point that we, like many other farmers, have stock backed up on

our property from last year with no buyers for them. Over the past few years, we have explored our options with our stock agents and buyers, who all assured us that the local processors would be able to take our wethers as mutton. This has turned out not to be the case – they do not have the required capacity. These are live animals with no place to go, as a direct result of the government's announcement. Due to this, we have made the momentous decision not to mate any Merino sheep this year. We cannot see a recovery path for this situation. **We need a market for our young sheep.** It is impossible to set up sufficient abattoirs in the short timeframe required (1-2 years). For this reason, we may stop farming sheep completely, bringing to an end a family enterprise which was started 115 years ago. The only possibility is to continue to allow these exports in a responsible manner.

Alternative products

Livestock production is a long-term enterprise. Much of our farm infrastructure is sheep-based, including shearing sheds, sheepyards, fencing, trough watering system and sheep handling equipment. Our on-farm stock has been bred over many years. **Switching from sheep would be costly and take years to do.**

Straight cropping enterprises use far more chemicals, with adverse outcomes for both human health and also for the environment. Much of our property is not suitable for cropping, and there is currently no additional abattoir capacity for other types of livestock, so we currently have no viable alternatives. **For these reasons it is critical that live sheep exports are not halted until sufficient replacement markets for our sheep have been developed.**

Consequences

There are many consequences of this decision which will have serious outcomes for people, livestock, the environment and the economy. There is an entire industry supply chain which has already affected by the downturn in sheep sales – farmers, agents, exporters, local towns, international customers – the list is long. If exports are shut down completely, there will be significant economic impacts to all of them. The already declining wool industry will also experience a significant downturn due to lower sheep numbers.

Already there are serious mental health issues due to the economic pressures. In addition, there is the looming risk that unsold sheep will put further pressures on our farms, especially if it does not rain this winter. The season has had a very dry start in [REDACTED] this year. On our farm we are past the point where we would normally be reducing stock numbers by selling some, but this year we are unable to. We are feeding them, but at some point they will need to be sold. Sheep farmers like myself care deeply for their stock, we do not want to see them suffer and it would break my heart if we have to destroy sheep due to lack of markets/feed.

Conclusion

Farming is becoming progressively more intensive. Livestock of all kinds – sheep, cattle, pigs and chickens are routinely placed into feedlots and sheds to increase production, particularly to finish them prior to processing. Live export is simply a feedlot on a ship. If sheep welfare on the ships is demonstrably the same or better than that in Australian land-based feedlots, why are they now being singled out?

The decision to end live sheep exports is clearly a political one. Cattle exports have been left out of this decision, as there are far more electorates which would be affected if they had been included. WA sheep farmers have been sacrificed as a bargaining chip in Canberra, with only two federal electorates affected. In addition, this consultation process was in progress with limited contact with the affected parties – WA sheep farmers. It appears to me that the WA regional meetings were added as an afterthought, with extremely short notice, at one of the busiest times of the farming year. This suggests that the whole process is merely a token effort, which is not really interested in hearing from the affected parties. I am very concerned that the government has not fully considered the consequences of their decision. These include damage to the food supply chain, and the international reputation of Australia as an unreliable food supplier. In addition to this, there will be many serious outcomes for people, livestock, the environment and the economy. **In conclusion, sheep farms are sustainable enterprises which make a significant contribution to national food and environmental security, and have already been seriously damaged by this announcement.**