

26/5/23

Live Sheep Phase Out Panel
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
GPO Box 858,
Canberra, ACT 2601

Dear Sirs

Re the phase out of live sheep via sea.

Background

I run a sheep farming operation near [REDACTED] Western Australia. The property is a [REDACTED] in an 800mm rainfall zone. Approximately 35 ha is considered to be arable, that is workable by machinery. The rest comprises shallow rock soils, heavy timbered and areas of coarse sand.

The South West of WA is a winter rainfall only area, no summer rainfall is received. This means that the pasture is based on annual species with a growing season from April to November, although this can be less in drier seasons.

My flock is a shedding sheep breed that sheds its wool once or twice a year and so do not require shearing, crutching and have little problems with flystrike and suit the property because there is no need for shearing sheds or employing shearing teams.

The flock consists of 450 breeding ewes, 150 replacement ewe lambs, 250 lambs sold each each year. 120 cull ewes are also sold every year.

Live sheep phase out.

Live sheep by sea has been an integral part of the WA sheep industry for many years.

Live sheep by sea is not just a market, but an alternative supply chain that delivers a product to an overseas market that they require. Phasing out live sheep by sea means this entire supply chain will have to be abandoned and alternative, processing and markets provided.

Live sheep by sea was initiated to provide a market for older sheep that were not desired by local processors and were classified as mutton, an undesirable product in the Australian market. Although over time the market has developed to include a sending much younger animal, most are still older than consumed by many markets. Markets that are specific to this product will be required to replace the live by sea market.

Impact

I normally do not sell into the live sheep by sea trade but occasionally it is required as domestic market options are not available. This years my marketing of 170 wether lambs provides an example. The lambs were initially offered to a local feedlot for preparation for domestic slaughter. The price offer at the time was \$2.70 per kg live weight. As the feed lot was full because of domestic processing delays, I was asked to hold for two weeks, however when the time came to sell them the price had dropped to \$2.20, a price per head drop of \$23.50 per head. A live sheep exporter was approached who was offering a price almost equivalent to the original price offered by the feed lot. The live sheep by sea trade provides an alternative market to the domestic processing market.

The disposal of sheep off farm is required because of seasonal conditions, operational requirements, environmental and welfare considerations.

W.A. has a winter growing season and so sheep need to be sold off farm during the summer and autumn months to retain soil cover during those months while waiting for the break of season rainfall. Reducing sheep number during this time preserves paddock cover, and allows pasture to grow and mature before grazing after the season break. This allows for strong pasture growth through out the season creating pasture cover for the summer autumn dry period, boosting soil organic carbon levels, and enabling pasture preservation of additional feed.

Reduced sheep numbers during this period setup the grazing strategies before the commencement of lambing in July/August. It also allows for any pasture renovation and reestablishment to occur.

The effect of having to hold unsold sheep beyond the normal sale time and into the winter and spring will significantly impact on the available feed for all sheep on the property as a well preserved feed for use during the summer autumn period following.

The seasonal conditions experienced this year also provide an example of the need to remove sheep from the property in timely manner. While our growing season initially commenced with excellent prospects of pasture growth and availability, rainfall in recent weeks as been low and spasmodic leading some areas of pasture dying on sand soils and rocky areas.

Fortunately I have been able to sell most of the sheep that I intended to sell including using the live by sea option to reduce sheep numbers to a level that will match the current pasture availability. Continuation of these conditions may require me to either sell more sheep or recommence supplementary feeding.

It is essential that the Western Australian sheep processing and markets be able to absorb the increases in supply when seasonal conditions require significant turnoff sheep to avoid animal welfare issues and environmental degradation.

Processor's of course will say that they are capable of handling sudden increases in turnoff, because the limits on their capacity creates an oversupply and places producers under duress which the processors then exploit. The processors are not well regarded by producers for there honesty and transparency.

Conclusion

I do not think that it is possible to phase out live sheep by sea until the alternative market supply chain is available that is capable of handling the unique market issues that are involved in the W.A. sheep trade.

I do not believe that any government has the ability or desire to make available the resources, finance or time frames to phase out live sheep by sea in an orderly fashion.