

Submission on Phase-Out of Live Sheep Exports

by

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I thank you for the opportunity to participate. I am an animal welfare advocate [REDACTED], who's spent a great deal of time studying the live sheep export industry. I believe the phase-out of the industry needs to be conducted over a short period of time, if it can't be within the current term of Parliament, then within no more than three years. It needs a short phase-out primarily, for the very reason it needed to end in the first place – because the industry cannot guarantee good animal welfare.

I interact with both sides of the debate and believe that despite most Australians being strongly opposed to the industry, the majority accept that a transition needs to occur. However, it **MUST** be legislated within the current term of Parliament, as Labor is not guaranteed another term. The government made an election commitment to end the trade on grounds of cruelty, so failure to legislate within the current term of Parliament, would break that commitment to trusting voters, and ensure the suffering of potentially millions more animals.

A long transition could be detrimental to the industry, due to the uncertainty it fuels. Especially in farmers. I've seen social media comments from some who don't appear to understand the existing market for boxed/chilled meat to the Middle East. Some unaware that they buy mutton, for example. If information could be made more readily accessible, it may make the transition less daunting. I feel making the process quick and easy is a kinder option than dragging it out. Attempting to ease their burden may end up prolonging it.

Such uncertainty is also likely to grow in the Middle East with a long phase-out, potentially damaging the more lucrative, existing market for our sheep meat, and limiting our chances of increasing it to replace live sheep. If we are committed to ending live sheep export to them, we should do so concisely, and offer immediate solutions with deals on the sheep meat they already purchase far more of.

Fresh concerns were raised recently following an episode of Landline, which featured a story from onboard live export ship Al Messilah. Footage showed a number of sheep receiving antibiotics, which Vets Against Live Export (VALE) noticed weren't tagged in a way that would allow them to be withheld prior to slaughter. Unlike Australian meat exports, which have strict residue compliance. This prompted concerns that antimicrobial residue in live sheep could damage the reputation of our considerably more profitable, antibiotic-free, meat export trade.

Worldwide, our international reputation for clean, green agriculture will suffer further damage the longer live sheep export continues. Australia is already ranked D in the World Animal Protection Index. Worse still, an appalling E for protecting animals used in farming. What could we score in another five years with continued controversy and another disaster or two?

Industry leaders will only increase their resistance the longer it continues, placing prolonged pressure on the government and taxpayers. Time and resources of the Senate have already been wasted. “Quid pro quo” accusations from The Nationals, after FOI’s revealed text messages with the RSPCA, were baseless.

Recent media reports (reignited by the industry) on the resumption of trade with Saudi Arabia has created significant confusion, sending the wrong message to farmers who should be focused on transitioning.

The government’s obligation to assist or provide alternatives to the industry is understandable, but must be within reason. The suffering of millions more sentient animals is not reasonable, or acceptable to the community. Nor is it comparable to the partial/temporary loss of income a limited number of people may experience, most of whom are in mixed farming enterprises anyway. The industry has been in decline for decades, from exporting over 6 million sheep in 2002 down to 500,000 last year. It’s been on notice since cruelty was exposed on the Awassi Express five years ago, and knowing Labor’s policy, has had two elections to prepare. If those involved aren’t prepared now, they probably never will be.

The main obstacle in the transition to onshore processing in Western Australia appears to be a lack of processing facilities, and workers to staff them. According to the “Countryman” four WA abattoirs are for sale, with investor funding an issue. The government may need to allocate funding or subsidies to these facilities. Also incentivise training in this field, and fast-track visas for overseas workers. Rebuilding processing facilities also has the potential to revive regions to the existence they enjoyed before live export forced the closure of meatworks in many towns, sending jobs overseas.

A lack of cold storage facilities was mentioned in one of the virtual forums I attended. I suggested the Commonwealth fund or subsidise facilities at a potential new port south of Fremantle, which the WA government has been investigating.

Prioritising these issues could expedite the phase-out, thereby offsetting economic loss faced by regional communities, with reports the market is already in decline.

Avoiding a prolonged phase-out reduces further risk of poor animal welfare, which is unavoidable within this industry. The Independent Observer program was one improvement providing transparency, and no doubt better welfare, but with only four of the 21 eligible voyages this year having room for an IO onboard, has all but collapsed. The dwindling number of IO reports available, detail that sheep on every shipment are affected by heat stress, as well as inanition and salmonellosis. Sheep with over length wool and horns, others suffering illness and injury are still being loaded. The latter no surprise after seeing sheep trucks arrive in Fremantle this week (May 30) for the Maysora consignment. The driver was pressured into loading above capacity – around 800 sheep, resulting in overcrowding, with limbs and heads protruding from the truck. Cattle too. To follow such unacceptable transportation with weeks at sea, sailing into 40°C Israeli heat thanks to a shortening of the MENA summer moratorium, is something that should not happen now, let alone another five years.

Every ageing ship to depart our shores tempts fate with the ever-present risk of mechanical failure. Demonstrated recently by the Nine Eagle, breaking down in Darwin Harbour with 1,800 cattle onboard. It could so easily have happened out at sea, becoming another welfare disaster. Obviously, the longer sheep are exported long distances in these vessels, the older they get and the chance of breaking down increases.

This issue can be debated until the cows (or sheep) come home, but for me it comes down to whether animal sentience is recognised. In 2022, the UK passed an Animal Sentience Bill which states any legislation affecting animals must consider their sentience. This is an important legal precedent Australia needs to follow.

If you believe, as animal welfare science has proven, that animals are sentient beings who FEEL their lives, you cannot allow the live sheep trade to go on one minute longer than absolutely necessary

Gandhi said, “The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way it's animals are treated”. PLEASE take the opportunity you've been given and make Australia a great nation soon. Not in five or more long years, when the chance may be lost, and millions more animals have suffered.