

Wednesday, 31st May 2023

To the Live Sheep Export Consultation Panel,

I am writing to you today in relation to the proposed prohibition of live sheep exports by sea. I own and operate a mixed farm consisting of Merino sheep, Black Angus cattle and cropping [REDACTED]. For the reasons set out below, I categorically oppose the prohibition of live sheep export by sea proposed by the federal government.

I, along with many others, first became aware of the proposed prohibition on the 17th of April, when I received an urgent email encouraging me to attend a meeting in my local town hall [REDACTED]. The meeting was for a consultation panel, setup by the federal government to provide information and collect suggestions regarding the prohibition of live sheep export by sea. The meeting was scheduled for that same day and gave approximately half a business day of warning to those in my local area. The consultation panel informed us that they did not have any capacity to discuss the merits or viability of a prohibition and that the primary reason for the meeting was so that we, as farmers, could provide suggestions to the government on alternative markets that we could use instead of live export. As a member of the professional community, I was appalled at the notice that was provided by a panel setup and authorised by the government. I was also appalled that the government chose to skip the consultation process with farmers, the primary stakeholders, on the merits of a prohibition. The lack of notice and consultation demonstrates a complete lack of professionalism and respect to the topic, the agricultural community and demonstrates that the government is not acting at an above-board level to tackle this social and economic issue.

The majority of farmers are already struggling with rising costs of farming inputs such as fuel and fertilisers. Farmers do not have the ability to control their input costs and nor are they able to control the value of their produce, putting them at the mercy of the markets available. Due to this financial pressure, farmers typically seek ways to enhance their profits by seeking new market alternatives and options. The current sheep market is already experiencing a significant low, our hogget weathers this summer sold for approximately half that of what they reached the prior summer, with no significant difference in animal conditioning. If there were alternative markets for our sheep, we would have already made use of them. They simply do not exist and if the government was to act responsibly, it would have explored this situation further prior to promising a prohibition that it does not understand.

Live export of sheep represents a significant portion of the agricultural market in Western Australia. Australia's current standard of practises for the live export of sheep already represents the highest standard in the world. We are currently in a position to be leading other countries; however, if we leave that market sector entirely, we will no longer be able to lead by example in raising standards for the rest of the world. Other countries will not cease live-export. Merino wethers are predominantly sold for live export and for obvious gender-based reasons represents approximately half of the merino sheep produced in Australia. If these no longer have a viable market, farmers will be unable to continue operating with a sellable value of only 50%. The removal of live export of sheep will result in a mass exodus from merino sheep and will have a flow-on effect to the following:

- (i) Reduction of sheep prices to an impractical value, which will result in the mass destruction of animals on farm by farmers simply because we will lose significant money by attempting to transport and sell them at market. This is obviously not in the interests of animal welfare and nor is it in the interests of the farmer. It is worth noting that many farmers will not have the luxury of a choice in this matter, they will unlikely be able to afford to send them off farm with the current market pressure and the future outlook with losing such a large portion of their assets. In 2022, the number of sheep fatalities through live export were recorded as 543, a rate of .14%. The number of breeding merino ewes is 30 million alone, without factoring in wethers or lamb populations. Therefore, it is highly likely that the mass destruction of sheep would be in the order of millions. This categorically cannot be an outcome that animal activists will find preferable to live export.

- (ii) Many farmers will redirect their production into alternative sources of income, predominantly cropping and cattle. This will damage these relevant markets as they become flooded with a supply higher than the demand. This proposed prohibition will negatively affect all sectors of agriculture.
- (iii) The financial hit associated with a prohibition will force many farmers to sell, resulting in a significant hit for the economical and mental health of rural communities. This will affect local businesses, schools, and local tourism.
- (iv) Farming will become less sustainable without the natural harmonious relationship between livestock and healthy soil. Fertiliser input rates will increase to counteract the lack of natural fertiliser in the form of manure. Weeds previously controlled by sheep will become more prominent and chemical inputs will increase. This will in turn further kill the biology existing within the soil. Australia's land will become less productive and sick, which will affect the quality of the food grown off it that we as a nation then consume.
- (v) The Labor government will be responsible for Australia leaving behind the Merino sheep and the associated world-renowned wool. This is a considerable part of Australia's reputation and identity and will most certainly affect our tourism industry and the way other countries view us.

Live export is in high demand by other countries due to their economic situation and their religious practises. I along with most Australians believe that animal welfare is important; however, I am also educated in the efforts that have been taken to improve animal welfare on live export sea vessels and that the standards are now of the highest in the world. The government asked the industry to raise the bar on its welfare standards and this was achieved. The mortality rate of sheep on these vessels is comparable to mortality rates of sheep whilst on farm, which supports the claim that their welfare on these vessels is world class and suitable. As other countries develop and adapt, the market demand may be able to shift towards pre-packaged meat as opposed to live export; however, we are not at this stage. The development required for these countries is significant and will take a considerably long time, in the order of multiple decades, especially given the current economic state of the world. Therefore, removing the live export of sheep from the table and presenting them with the unviable option of pre-packaged meat will not be accepted. They will simply take their market to other countries, who are not hindered by welfare standards, regulations, or activists. If we prohibit the live export of sheep by sea, we will not achieve any positives for this world. We will not improve animal welfare for the sheep that are sourced from other countries, we will destroy our Australian Merino population and market, and we will put a nail in the coffin for many of our Australian farmers. No-one will benefit from this prohibition.

The government fails to recognise that most farmers are struggling to make ends meet. This is partly due to the government's interference with live export as very few boats are transporting from WA due to the uncertainty of the market's future. Live export may not represent the majority of our income source; however, it does represent for many of us the difference between surviving and going under. This combined with the subsequent reduction of other markets such as cropping and cattle will likely see the end of many farming operations across the state. This will result in a mass exodus from many rural towns, killing off local businesses, schools and tourism locations. Unemployment rates will rise and international investors will buy our farm land so that they can produce food for their own people. This is not in the best interests of the agricultural region and nor is it in the best interests of the government. Live export has a place in our current society and operations. If this proposed ban comes to pass, members throughout the whole industry may be in a position where they feel the only option is to take litigative action through a class action against the government to obtain enough compensation to live. Given the lack of consultation and that the industry has already gone above and beyond to meet improved standards that are now the best in the world, it is feasible that they would have a legal standing to do so.

It should go without saying that the impacts of having to kill thousands of our livestock and sell our family farms with little future employment prospects will have significant effects on mental health. This will undoubtedly push many over the edge to commit suicide. This is not a matter of potential consequence; it is a guaranteed outcome from proceeding with this prohibition. The responsibility for this wholly lies on the Labor government for acting on a matter that it does not understand and without consulting with the parties that do. If you are reading this, you are playing a part, to some degree, in the outcome of this proposed ban. Whether it is at a level of making

recommendations or having the final say on the decision, you have a degree of responsibility, and it would be prudent to seriously consider the repercussions of those actions.

The proposed solution by the Labor government is to build more abattoirs in Australia and process the excess sheep within Australia and then sell this product through overseas markets. This solution is not viable as staff cannot be found to operate these abattoirs. Our existing abattoirs are currently running at significantly less than full capacity due to lack of staffing. Based on a show of hands at the consultation meeting [REDACTED], the vast majority of WA farmers have had trouble this year in getting their sheep into abattoirs due to this lack of staffing and as a consequence; sheep prices in the domestic market are already on the verge of being unprofitably low. The lack of research that the government has undertaken into the viability of this solution is unacceptable and demonstrates that due diligence on the merits of a ban of live sheep export by sea has not been performed by the Labor government prior to acting.

As more farmers are forced to sell and more farms move to cropping only operations, the amount of locally produced food will decrease and the reliance on imported foods will rise. This is not in the best interests of our nation's quality of food and subsequently the health of our nation with diet playing a key part in human health. This will increase living costs to the whole of Australia, placing further pressure on the economy and thus whilst indirectly, this proposed ban will come at a long-term cost to both the government and the citizens of Australia.

Whilst activism presents a potential pathway for change where required, it can bypass discussion formats that are based around reason and logic. In our current social climate of social media, it has never been easier for activism to be less informed and to have one's voice and opinions heard. This is due to the fact that social media can so easily omit or twist the truth and subject people to the peer-pressure of others before they are able to form their own educated opinion. Implementing changes based on this method of information transfer does not lend itself to a responsible society. Change should come from an educated standpoint and not primarily from an emotionally charged and biased point of view. Because of the government's choice to act upon this pressure, farmers are now forced to defend their position and right to survive in Australia. As we are the minority, any well justified and professionally appropriate argument that we make is met by a multitude of emotive, unsupported and in many cases vicious claims. This is dangerous territory for the government for if it chooses to act based on the emotional and unjustified demands of activists, it sets a precedent that allows any loud group to effect change regardless of its merits or consequences. The solution to this social issue does not lie in suppressing the agricultural sector and its communities, it rests in the proper education for the nation regarding the current welfare standards of sheep on these export vessels. A clear divide has formed between the rural sector and the city-based community. The only way that this divide can be bridged and to reduce the number of these social issues that occur in the future is through education and connection. This is where the Australian government should focus its efforts in the response to activism as it would at least allow for decisions to be made on an educated opinion.

Farming is a sector of production that the majority of the public wish to disregard, but one that they cannot hope to function or live without. The survival of the agriculture sector is paramount to the survival of Australia and the government should seek to protect that by educating the wider population rather than reacting to them. This proposed ban should not proceed if Australia wants to retain an agricultural industry.

I strongly urge you to consider my argument above and the arguments put forth by my fellow farmers. There are no benefits to be gained by the prohibition of live sheep export by sea for Australia as a nation and for the worldwide welfare of sheep and by extension all livestock.

Yours Sincerely,

Jake Francis Davies
Farmer & Senior Structural Engineer
[REDACTED]