

John Neil

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Live sheep export submission

1. Grant live export license to Saudi Importer.
2. Reverse the policy to ban live export.
3. Compensate farmers for their losses as a result the establishment of the Live Export Committee, which undermined the confidence in the sheep market and drove importers of the sheep to seek alternate sources.
4. Allow the export of live sheep to the middle east between 1st June and 14th September.
5. Set up mental health assistance for the affected farmers, stock agents, livestock carriers and exporters.

I am a fourth-generation farmer who operates a small sheep and cereal farm of 1800 ha in the [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] Western Australia. The farm was settled in 1908. We have been farming merino sheep for many years.

My family has been involved in live export for many years with my uncle, [REDACTED], closely involved in the establishment of the live sheep export trade in his role at the department of Agriculture.

The farms income is roughly one third from grain sales, one third from wool sales and one third from sheep sales. This diversified mix of enterprises is robust against seasonal and market changes.

Our farming system relies on the sale of our young wethers as stores at between 9 months to 18 months of age. These store sheep are not sought after by the local processors but are preferred by the live export trade.

The sale of the wethers to the live export market gives additional flexibility to manage the different seasonal conditions. In the drier, harder seasons we can sell our wethers to reduce our stocking rates. In the better seasons we can hold the sheep longer to grow more wool and meat.

Without the live export trade alternate markets would be required for these wethers. We investigated four possibilities; selling the younger sheep to the feed lotters, selling trade lambs to the local processors, selling lambs to go onto cropping farmers stubbles, or keeping the sheep for longer and selling to the local processors as mutton.

None of these options seems viable. The lower feed conversion rates do not make the merino wether lamb attractive to the feed lotters. We found trying to fatten the lambs for the lamb market too time consuming and expensive, particularly through the summer months when no green feed was available. The cropping farmers were not interested in wethers to feed off their stubbles due to the fear of not being able to sell the sheep later as the live export market had disappeared. Even though we were given assurances that we would be able to sell the wethers to the mutton market, it would appear that the processors do not actually have the kill space.

It would appear to me that since the government has established the committee, the sheep trade has lost confidence which has resulted in large price drops. I think it would be appropriate for the Government to compensate all farmers, carriers and stock agents affected by this market interference.

In the short term there is a pending sheep welfare problem as a result of the thousands of sheep not been exported to the middle east. The middle eastern countries are importing live sheep from alternative sources, leaving thousands of sheep on farm with nowhere to go. With the continuing dry start to this season, it is foreseeable that these sheep will be euthanised on farm.

Regardless of the claims of the processors, currently the abattoirs don't have the capacity to clear this backlog. If the current dry season continues, I can see this ending up as disaster, for both sheep and farmer. No farmer likes to see their sheep suffer, but their pockets are not infinitely large, without a market will we be forced to shoot sheep just like last time the government got it wrong!

The government needs to be providing mental health assistance to the farmers affected by this bad policy, who at best will be suffering large financial losses, and at worst have to destroy their stock.

Without the ability to sell our wethers at a reasonable price, this has led us to re-evaluate our entire sheep operation. We have left over sheep which were unable to sell from last year. This resulting us to make the decision not to mate any merino ewes to merino rams this season. I would see this as an end to sheep on my property.

The sheep industry is a large employer, from shearers and shed staff, livestock carriers, stock agents, the abattoirs not to forget the entire wool industry. I'm a passionate wool grower, if I'm thinking of stopping sheep farming, then no doubt so are many others. This will result in a lot of unemployment.

I see live stock in general, and sheep in particular as an important component of a mixed farming system;

Sheep help breakdown crop stubbles which reduces the need to burn or disk the stubbles. Both burning or disking stubbles have poor environmental outcomes, releasing carbon into the atmosphere and destabilising the soil surface leaving the soil exposed to erosion.

Sheep help remove excess grain from paddocks, which results in less mice and snails, both of which have recently become serious pests to crop farmers. The current solution seems to be to use chemical control which is bad for the environment.

Sheep help to remove weed seeds which means that less chemical needs to be used for weed control.

Sheep can be utilised on country which is not suitable for cropping. In order for farms to remain profitable, it is necessary to utilise all of the property.

Sheep grazed on pastures provides a weed and disease break in the rotation, resulting on less chemical requirements.

Sheep grazed on good legume pastures can provide organic nitrogen to the following years crop. Legume pastures reduce the requirement of man-made nitrogen fertilizer.

Sheep provide an alternate source of income diversification, spreading the risk in years when the crops don't perform so well.

Sheep in general, wethers in particular provided a tool for managing the different seasonal conditions. In a good season, keep the sheep for longer and grow more wool and meat. In a poor season, sell the sheep earlier to reduce the stocking rate and provide some income. The best market for these wethers is for live export.

Merino sheep are a good compromise, providing income from both wool and meat. Meat only sheep do not provide the management flexibility or multiple income sources. Merino sheep are well adapted for mixed farming in Western Australia.

I feel that government policy is based on opinions of people far removed from the actual industry. Such popular decisions are rarely good decisions. Good governance is the result of good decisions, rather than popular decisions. As a sheep farmer who sells the live export market, we feel that we have been sacrificed as we operate in two electorates which are far from the centre of power.

I would also note that only live export of sheep is being stopped. Cattle will still be exported. Pigs and chickens will still be factory farmed? This seems a little hypocritical to me. Perhaps the government and RSPCA is targeting the soft targets.

From the importers point of view, I would see the stopping of live export as a sovereign risk for foreign customers. The imports were told to meet stricter requirements, which from all reports they did, but the government still shut them down. Why would you trade with a government which behaves in such a manner?

I believe that stopping the live export of sheep will in fact have a worse animal welfare than if it continues. In the short term there are thousands of sheep with no market, which will have to be euthanised on farm unless conditions improve. Without livestock more crops will

be grown, more chemicals, more inorganic fertilizers and the removal of more trees. This will not have a favourable outcome for native animals or the environment.

I fully understand the changes in regulations for the fishing and forestry industries. In the case of native forests, the trees are “state” property, and the amount available trees have been reduced. Similarly for wild caught fisheries the resource is state owned. However, in the case of sheep, these are farmer owned, and bred, and managed in a sustainable manner.

I would like to mention how disappointed I am with the whole government sheep livestock committee. Firstly, there is nobody on the committee representing the people most affected by the policy. That is Western Australian Sheep farmers, farm workers, shearers, stock agents, livestock carriers and wool industry workers.

Animal welfare is directly represented with Heather Neil, a former RSPCA CEO.

The bureaucrats are represented by Phillip Glyde.

The Government by the Warren Snowdon, who arguably has a voice for the cattle farmers and exporters.

I’m sorry but Sue Middleton does not represent the interests of Western Australian sheep farmers and sheep industry works. From what I can work out she is a citrus farmer. This is like me claim to be able to represent vegetable growers as years ago I had a vegetable garden in the back yard?

If the government was serious about the people affected, they would have a sheep industry representative on the committee. Somebody like Digby Stretch.

The timing of the meetings was embarrassing. We were given very short notice, in my case a matter of hours to attend meetings which were in one of the busiest times of the year, the middle of seeding. This shows a complete lack of respect for the people directly impacted by the committee. Further to this case the zoom meetings were advertised in AEST, when the target audience is in Western Australia.

For some reason I feel we are being treated like the criminals, like we have done something wrong. But for the life of me I can’t figure out what. I run livestock which are well suited to my mixed farming and farming system. I have spent many thousands of dollars on infrastructure to support sheep. I have tried very hard to be environmentally conscious. With approximate 1/3 of my farm excluded from farming operations, neither livestock nor cropping. This includes waterways and bush areas. I try to minimise my chemical use and don’t burn or disk my stubble. I spend considerable effort in developing a resilient farming system. Yet I currently have 1500 wethers which I’ve not been able to sell, due to the complete lack of confidence in the sheep market. With the continuing dry conditions this is rapidly become a huge problem. And yes, I did take measures to avoid this situation but have been sadly let down.

Naturally this is causing sufficient stress in my household. My wife, whom is largely responsible for looking after our sheep, crying every time she thinks about it. I think we will be able to survive the financial impact of this bad policy but I'm not sure that I can survive the mental aspect.