

Phase out of live sheep exports by sea - Submission N. Kopas

Introduction

I have been involved in wildlife rescue and care for over 21 years and whilst I am predominantly involved with the rescue and care of injured birds, I believe that we as a society have a responsibility towards all animals under our immediate care, and also an obligation to speak up for how animals are treated in our broader community. I have been appalled by many of the facts and stories that have come to light over the past decade regarding live animal export of Australian animals and would like to discuss the following terms of reference: how the government should phase out live sheep exports by sea, the timeframe to implement the phase out, support and adjustment options for those impacted by the phase out and opportunities, including options to expand domestic processing and increase sheep meat exports.

How the government should phase out live sheep exports by sea

Since the first expose in 2003 showing the horrors of life on an export ship, the broader Australian community was horrified by the reality of live export and called for a ban.¹ This has not been an issue isolated to animal right advocates, it's become a concern for the average Australian, with a survey showing approximately three-quarters are opposed to live export and 9 out of 10 want standards improved.²

As such, the writing has been on the wall for the past 20 years at a minimum that live export has lost its social licence and both farmers and government have had time to discuss how best to implement this.

The government has an obligation to provide a clear plan that details time frames for each stage of the phase out and also provides a clear description of the support that is available to farmers and workers at other points within the industry during the transition. This enables those impacted to consider their options, make plans early and definitively and to transition with a minimum of stress.

The uncertainty around 'what happens next and when?' is a clear example of government vacillating when a decision to implement a phase out has already been made and this does no one any favours. Workers at all stages of the supply chain need certainty in what the future holds.

The timeframe to implement the phase out

Following on from the previous point, the time frame needs to be announced as soon as possible and it must be within this term of government. Anything less is disingenuous from

¹ <https://www.9news.com.au/national/60-minutes-live-exportation-sheep-australia/ec8ce0ee-32c3-4596-b644-53ba03d41bf8>

² <https://maritime-executive.com/article/poll-a-majority-of-australians-reject-live-export>

a government whom the voting public expects to uphold their election promises. Especially when there is no guarantee of a second term meaning that any delays in announcing time frames risks the promise to phase out live sheep exports by sea becoming little more than a fairy tale and doing irreparable damage to the already fickle trust that many Australians have for our politicians.

It is impossible to consider the live export trade without considering the impact of climate change on temperatures, especially in the Middle East which is a regular trade route for live exported animals. Records show temperatures spiking at over 50 degrees celsius in multiple cities and a prediction that by 2050 the average temperature will have risen by 4 degrees. Conditions on board a ship for animals are primitive at best and many voyages have no vet on their staff to monitor conditions and treat ill animals. The longer that the government waits to commit to a time frame, the greater the impact of global warming on the animals who will continue to be shipped in the growing heat conditions.

As an authority who is supposed to act in the best interests of ALL Australians, which includes our sentient sheep, and who are tasked with representing the will of our voting public, subjecting animals to worsening conditions is against what the public wants for Australian animals.

A time frame for the phase out of live export of sheep by sea must be announced in this term of government and must commence within this term of government.

Support and adjustment options for those impacted by the phase out

There must be a comprehensive plan to assist those impacted by the phase out of live export. Whilst this represents only a small proportion of the agricultural workforce, it is likely that there will be a further need for these support options in the future for other related industries as other forms of live export trade will hopefully also begin to be phased out. Setting up a support infrastructure now will ease these future transitions also.

Firstly there needs to be a comprehensive review to capture data and numbers of all impacted workers, this includes farmers, but also others involved in transport or shipping whose livelihoods may also be affected. This will allow the government to understand the scope of support required and the funding. (Hopefully this has already been done, they have had 20 years to start preparing!)

Secondly, the alternative options for the future need to be identified and clearly presented to workers. For some, this may represent little change, transport drivers may be able to shift to driving other loads with little disruptions, however for those involved in raising sheep for live export slaughter, there may need to be more detailed options presented to them. Bridging courses may need to be developed or existing courses may need to be amended. A support hotline must be created staffed with 'careers councillors' who are able to discuss and give advice on transitions. This should be staff who are experienced with and

knowledgeable about the agricultural sector and job opportunities within it.

Opportunities to upskill or learn new skills must be offered immediately and with flexible learning options to respect the limitations of those still working within the industry currently. The goal is to create a range of modes that provide a simple, easily accessible process for learning.

Existing agricultural courses should also be modified to discuss alternative income sources and pathways besides live export trades to new graduates.

Government must also invest into exploring the barriers that may exist towards study and/or transitioning to new roles within the agricultural sector and develop potential solutions as a priority.

If workers feel supported in deciding their future paths, they are more likely to embrace changes rather than opposing them and a more productive and less stressful workforce will ensue. This is especially important when considering the mental health concerns that have been highlighted amongst farmers in recent years and the tragic impacts this may have. Ensuring a smooth transition away from live sheep export benefits everyone.

Opportunities, including options to expand domestic processing and increase sheep meat exports.

Whilst I would prefer to see domestic processing over live export if they were the only 2 options, my preference is neither, so luckily we are not forced to only consider those 2 possibilities.

“looking ahead, the CEO of beef giant Cargill recently said that plant-based meat could make up as much as 10 percent of the meat market within a few years.”³

A growing environmentally conscious and health conscious consumer is changing the agricultural sector. ‘Meat free Monday’ is no longer a novelty, concerns around dietary factors affecting heart disease and cancer outcomes have growing awareness and allergies and food intolerances are creating a growing market for certain foods such as plant mylks over dairy. Plant based agriculture presents many opportunities for the future, especially if we tap into this growing market early. In fact jobs can even increase in regional areas as many farms are run remotely with minimal staffing, yet processing of plant proteins requires staff. A recently approved expanding legume processing plant in SA demonstrates this:

It is expected to create up to 1345 construction jobs and 384 new direct manufacturing jobs by 2024.⁴

³ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22609382/plant-based-meatless-future-transition-farmers-meatpacking-workers>

⁴ <https://www.foodanddrinkbusiness.com.au/news/378m-plant-protein-manufacturing-project>

Supporting our regional communities has benefits beyond those immediately seen by job creation. The flow on effect to keep communities stable is far further reaching and positive.

Conclusion

Live sheep exports by sea are not acceptable to the majority of the Australian community nor to the sheep involved! There has been ample time for those affected to consider their options for the future and with appropriate government support these transitions can be made in a fair and facilitated manner.

The Albanese government made a commitment to phase out live sheep exports and this commitment must be honoured in good faith. Their reluctance to commit to a time frame or even to discuss the options is deceitful and only creates uncertainty with the industry, distrust within the general population and disrespect from the International community, especially when viewed against the actions of our neighbouring nation New Zealand who made a similar commitment due to animal welfare concerns and honoured it within a 2 year timeframe.

The world as we know it will not end if we implement a phase out of live sheep exports, unless it is to create a better world, and hopefully one where the phase out of live export of other animals by sea and land soon follows.

The time to end live sheep export is NOW and I call upon our federal government to take action.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this pivotal inquiry into the future of Australian sheep currently destined for live export.

Natalie Kopas

Please note, I give permission for this submission to be made public, including my name.