

**Submission to  
the Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism  
on Victorian Agriculture**

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Thank you to the elected officials of Victoria for mounting this important inquiry. Your role is both to reflect and reflect upon the diversity of opinions within Victoria on this topic and to lead the community forward by finding as much common ground as possible. As the issues under consideration are not unique to Victoria, this inquiry provides an opportunity for the Victorian government to adopt a future forward position and become a model for other western governments grappling with these weighty questions.

The first step toward a future forward posture is to expunge the lazy, inaccurate, and dangerous stigmatization of animal advocates as terrorists. This labeling trivializes the damage that actual violent terrorism poses and insults those who have been victims of such terrorism or whose family, friends or familiars have. (It is especially troublesome to misuse this terminology at a time when Australia is wrestling with the repatriation of the family members of ISIS fighters from Syrian detention camps.) Responsible political actors and those who claim to be leaders in a democratic society should not descend to such misuse of language but should strive for honesty, fairness, and respect in their vocabularies.

The terrorist label also conceals the extent to which animal advocates share and express many of the views of society more generally. It is widely acknowledged that Australians “place a value on farm animal welfare and benefit from knowing animals are being treated humanely.”<sup>1</sup> Animal advocates are thus spokespeople for these wider societal concerns and commitments. Indeed, animal activists should be seen as demanding consumer sovereignty for the milk, meat, and poultry industries. They want to shine a light on the cruelty and abuse that takes place in these areas of food production.

That animal advocates have to resort to direct action and potentially illegal means is a reflection on these industries’ lack of transparency, not on the advocates’ motivations. Their goal is not to break the law or cause harm for its own sake; their goal is to disseminate knowledge about the hidden suffering of animals in the food industries to consumers of these industries’ products. In a democratic state like Victoria, those who shroud their economic activities in secrecy should be scrutinized by government, not those who would expose cruel and unnecessary practices. No democratic government should delegitimize and disenfranchise its own citizens for unveiling the truth to fellow citizens who are also consumers of these products.

As noted above, a future forward approach by a democratic government will strive to create common ground and co-operation among industrialists who grow animals for food, consumers of their products, and animal advocates. We are repeatedly told how much farmers love their animals. If so, they should be eager to join with the government and animal advocates to create animal-based food production regimes that minimize, and ideally remove, animal cruelty.

Public concern with these aspects of the animal-based food industry increases when animal advocates expose their findings. Silencing their exposés is not the way to solve this problem – that would be a future past approach. A future forward approach will require the animal-based food industries to improve their practices so that they become more transparent to their customers, enabling those who consume animal products to have more information about and more confidence in their purchases.<sup>2</sup> Only this information and this confidence can enable genuine choice for consumers. Without this confidence, the trend toward plant-based alternatives is likely to increase. Irrespective of government regulation, animal-based food industrialists who want to retain their domestic market share should recognize and respect their customers' concerns by making their production processes more transparent. As Calla Wahlquist, writing for *The Guardian* newspaper, recently noted, "in shutting protesters down without addressing their core concerns, both industry and government risk making it look as though agricultural producers have something to hide."<sup>3</sup> Maligning and silencing animal advocates is a blinkered and regressive approach to this challenge.

Instead of expending government time and public funds prosecuting animal advocates, a democratic government would be well advised to applaud and support animal-based food industries who improve the treatment of those animals in their care who are reared and killed for food. This latter use of taxpayer funds is more in line with public sentiment about avoidable animal cruelty in food production. These animal-based food industries are often owned by hugely wealthy individuals and corporations, some of which (about 13%) are based outside Australia.<sup>4</sup> Such industries should be encouraged to re-invest some of their massive profits in improving the living and dying conditions of animals in their care. This would be a form of corporate social responsibility and would, with appropriate publicity, engender ongoing consumer loyalty among their many Australian customers who care about animal welfare.<sup>5</sup> To quote Wahlquist again, "... a focus on the protests themselves has distracted the agriculture industry from what ought be its core focus. That is, maintaining trust with consumers through robust and transparent animal welfare processes."

This issue will not go away and the animal-based food industries create wider problems than those noted above. The adverse impact of industrial agriculture on the environment and global heating is well known. This will only intensify as global heating does and more non-western countries increase their animal consumption. And of course the effects of global heating are felt by the animal industries themselves as animals die tragically in droughts and floods.

The use of antibiotics in industrial agriculture and its impact on human health is another facet of this issue. Kinder and fairer treatment of the countless animals who live and die in food industries would reduce the need to pump them full of hormones and antibiotics. Prosecuting animal advocates will only distract from and retard leadership on these other urgent facets of this issue.<sup>6</sup>

As any Australian who has ever returned from abroad, or tried to import items, knows, this country takes bio-security seriously. So the concerns of animal –based food industrialists about this issue should be respected. But bio-security begins at home: they need to demonstrate that their own animal handling practices are hygienic and sanitary despite the over-crowding that is legion in these industries. Given the many adverse impacts that intensive agriculture creates, they also need to convince us that their industries do not generate bio-hazards for the wider community and future generations.

I urge the Victorian government to seize this opportunity to demonstrate future forward democratic leadership on this important issue. Please do not relapse into apparently easy and cheap solutions that will not work, that do nothing to relieve avoidable animal suffering, and will only create worse problems in the long term.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission’s 2016 Report “Regulation of Australian Agriculture”, No. 79, Nov. 15, (page 20). For detailed data on community values and attitudes, see “Australia’s Shifting Mindset on Farm Animal Welfare”, Futureye, 2018. (Commissioned by the federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources) See also Animal Tracker Australia: Baseline Survey June 2014.

<sup>2</sup> “... animal welfare regulations are not meeting community expectations about the humane treatment of farm animals ...” “Regulation of Australian Agriculture” cited above, (page 21).

<sup>3</sup> “Scott Morrison has something in common with this extreme animal rights activist”, July 4, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> “Foreign ownership of Australian farmland grows”, Jon Condon, *Beef Central*, Jan 17, 2019. The list of Australia’s biggest landowners shows that foreign interests or individuals represent more than 13% of this group; if we look at the top fifty landholders, they are closer to 20%. See “Australia’s biggest 50 landowners revealed”, Lovemoney.com Of foreign-owned land, livestock industries account for 85%. “Foreign Ownership” cited above.

<sup>5</sup> “... producers have an incentive to improve animal welfare to meet changing consumer demands for higher welfare products.” “Regulation of Australian Agriculture” cited above, (page 20).

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<sup>6</sup> On both these issues, see for example page 1835 of “Reducing Meat Consumption in the USA: a nationally representative survey of attitudes and behaviors”, by Roni A. Neff et. al., *Public Health Nutrition*: 21, 10, 2018, pp. 1835-1844. Available online via open access.

