

20/07/2019

Dr Monika Merkes

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Re: Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

Animals living on farms are vulnerable to abuse. Such abuse is regularly brought to the attention of the broader community. Public exposure is almost always due to the work of whistle-blowers, through undercover investigations and unauthorised entry to animal agricultural properties. In a democracy, citizens have a right to know whether and how regulations and animal welfare standards are being implemented.

Community concern about the treatment of animals is increasing. A recent report* commissioned by the federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources found Australians are greatly concerned about the welfare of farm animals: 95% of people are concerned about farm animal welfare and 91% want reform. Animals are sentient beings, and many routine animal husbandry procedures, such as dehorning and castration without pain relief or maceration of male chicks, are not acceptable to the community. The public expect governments to regulate animal welfare issues effectively, and current regulations are perceived to be inadequate. Only one in ten people interviewed for this report believed current regulation is adequate. The report concluded that "Not responding to changing societal expectations creates a social licence threat for the Department". This is compelling advice for all levels of government.

Rather than introducing ag gag laws similar to those in some US states, strategies should be introduced to strengthen animal welfare laws and regulations, together with improved compliance monitoring and enforcement. These include in particular:

- an independent office of animal welfare
- farm animals to be covered by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act
- increased resources for the RSPCA so that their inspectors can follow up on all reported suspicions of animal abuse
- CCTV in suspected cases of abuse
- increased transparency in animal agriculture
- a mandatory rather than voluntary code of practice.

If and when the community can be assured that animal cruelty on farms has stopped, there will be no need for whistle-blowers to enter farms to expose cruel treatment.

Sincerely,

Dr Monika Merkes

*Futureye (2018). Commodity or sentient being? Australia's shifting mindset on farm animal welfare. Windsor Victoria: Futureye Pty Ltd. Available at <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/animal/farm-animal-welfare.pdf>