

Inquiry name: Inquiry into the impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture.

Dr Penny Hocking



Submission Content.

My Introduction

I have been involved in the animal industry all my life, growing up on a beef farm, studying veterinary science, working as a veterinarian with both small and large animals for over 35 years, and owning, running and raising our family on a Victorian dairy farm for 11 years.

I have slowly come to the educated conclusion that our system of intense animal agriculture in Australia is:

- unacceptably cruel considering our scientifically based modern knowledge on animal sentience
- illogically mostly legal
- unsustainable
- unnecessary
- out of line with the expectations of the majority of the Australian community,
- and most importantly – wrong !

I see all species as sentient, amazing fellow animals who have the right to their 5 freedoms, the right to live a good life which they want to live. I see fellow humans having abused their domination by exploiting those who can't speak up and our resultant diminished humanity has culminated from greed, over consumerism and corruption.

So it is with disappointment that inquiries like this one continue to originate from out of touch, ill-informed and seemingly uncompassionate politicians, who often have a conflict of interest in protecting what I call "Big Ag".

Attempts to punish whistle-blowers by adding harsher penalties to already adequate legislation for trespass and related offences, is just more of the same cover up of hidden animal cruelty in intensive animal farms today, more of the same denial of information to the public of what actually happens to animals from birth through to the slaughterhouse, and more protection for those who carry out practices on livestock that are ILLEGAL in other species. How can that make sense?

Because it is only from rescuers working undercover in animal industries that the truth is exposed. And we need that to continue unhindered, until there is change.

It is not the farmers that are at fault, it is our system. We can do much better for all.

the type and prevalence of unauthorised activity on Victorian farms and related industries, and the application of existing legislation;

Unauthorised activity has been blown out of all proportion (prevalence and type) by the media and "big Ag" and their associated politicians resulting in the public being ill informed and misled. This has

caused an overreaction. The whistle-blowers are trying to expose legislated violence and cruelty by peacefully trespassing onto farming industries, where the animals live or are slaughtered. As far as I know, these people have not entered homes, not been near farmers' families, have not intimidated farmers, have not had weapons and have not caused any damage to property. They do not want to break laws, but years of apathy by our leaders and corporations for the need to change, means this is what they have to do to hasten awareness of the atrocities to animals, and thus eventually to industry reform.

I think existing legislation covers trespass and related offences adequately.

As a comparison, shooters who are *allowed* to go onto public lands with guns and kill wild animals that do not belong to them, many protected, illegally leaving animals suffering and damaging the environment as they go. Why are there not harsher penalties that are acted upon, for them?

the workplace health and safety

Whistle-blowers in animal industries pose no threat to workers or owners H&S. There is of course a threat to their own H&S during their short visit due to the environment and the stress of seeing and hearing suffering and death. But they choose to risk this for the sake of exposing the truth. Unfortunately the workers in these industries often have no choice and the H&S risks happen daily. It is physically demanding work and often poorly paid, in very unpleasant conditions – uncomfortable temperatures, smells, poor ventilation, working with dangerous equipment on dangerous surfaces. There is exposure to pathogens and disease, such as Leptospirosis and Q fever. The work itself, which may involve repeated killing, handling sick and injured animals, inflicting pain, listening to the screaming of animals suffering, must take a huge toll on mental health of workers and owners in these industries.

It is our animal agriculture system itself that negatively impacts on workplace H&S.

and biosecurity risks, and potential impacts of animal activist activity on Victorian farms,

It is unfounded that farmers consider the main worry from trespassing as biosecurity. As far as I know there has been no record of any act of activism that has caused a biosecurity incident in Australia. Compare this to the diseases that develop within our current intensive farming that cause suffering to millions of animals, can spread to neighbouring farms and some even to people. What about antibiotic resistance - a huge biosecurity risk to us all, caused by practices on farms.

It is intensive animal agriculture itself that poses the biggest biosecurity risk to trade and our survival.

Farmers are worried that the animals have been interfered with after an "invasion"??? Perhaps the animals' could choose their preferred interference – teeth, tails or beaks cut in unhygienic conditions with no pain relief, testicles "surgically" removed again no anaesthetic, artificial insemination, confinement, crowding, artificial diets and lights, babies removed soon after birth, OR a moment of kindness, soft touch and reassurance that some humans understand the gross injustice. Of course – they can't speak our language to tell us.

to Victoria's economy and international reputation;

I can't see the current whistle-blower activity having any impact on the short term economy of Vic. As it continues and the public becomes more aware of, and educated on, the hidden cruelty that produces their food, then they will demand change. They will be angry at being deceived for so long.

With a progressive government introducing changes to legislation, supported by independent advisors with the knowledge and ability to help transition from our current farming system to a more sustainable and ethical one, farmers and our state economy will thrive, and this transition will be strongly supported by society. There of course will be some short term difficulties but if managed well and with truthful and scientifically backed education for all in areas such as human nutrition, animal sentience and environmental impacts, it can, and must, be done.

Imagine being a world leader in this inevitable change to the way we farm and provide food for the global population. Victorians would show how humans can regain their inherent kindness, recover our obligation to all sentient beings and slow down and reverse our devastating exploitation of the environment and fellow animals.

Victoria's resultant excellent international reputation would be admired by many countries. The process, knowledge and skills of our agricultural transformation will become a valuable commodity.

May I quote – *“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated” Mohandas Gandhi*

the civil or criminal liability of individuals and organisations who promote or organise participation in unauthorised animal activism activities;

Individuals and organisations who promote or organise participation in unauthorised animal activism activities should be given freedom to continue their mission, as their resultant work informs the public of the truth of animal agriculture, where their food comes from and how it gets to their plate.

Activists such as Lyn White have been applauded and recognised for exposing illegal cruelty. How can you applaud on one hand and penalise on the other, when the outcome of the whistle blowing that is being organised, is unknown?

It would be impossible to regulate the organisation on social media of an undercover welfare activity, we can't even do it properly with bullying, an infinitely more harmful social issue. It is a knee jerk reaction to consider this. There are too many means of promotion.

provide recommendations on how the Victorian Government and industry could improve protections for farmers' privacy, businesses,

The privacy of businesses where animals are not given their 5 freedoms and are subject to cruelty and suffer, should not have any protection of privacy. Personal privacy is not the issue here, although indicated by farmers, it is the business that needs to be compliant with current laws (which are inadequate) and the public interest.

These businesses (factory farms and slaughterhouses) are already wrongly protected with

1. Lack of transparency. There is insufficient inspection to prevent cruelty on factory farms and in slaughterhouses, as shown by recent footage from whistle-blowers eg Riverside Meats at Echuca, Bridgewater Poultry Farm Bendigo. Businesses are run behind closed doors, the animals

hidden in sheds, their living conditions and practices routinely performed are unable to be checked by any independent person or body who does not have a conflict of interest. It is hidden because it is unacceptable to society.

2. Misleading marketing. Advertising food products with pictures of happy and free animals, indicating that the dead animal, or animal product you are about to buy, lived a comfortable and satisfied life before it was willing to die for you, is corrupt. The power of big ag and advertising ensures the majority of consumers never think otherwise, it is only when you start thinking for yourself and taking the time to be educated, that you realise food packaging is one big lie.
3. Current Australian regulations and standards see below *

Recommendations.

1. a) Improve transparency by installing CCTV in all slaughterhouses and factory farms. This would enable managers to monitor their business activities so they can immediately deal with any issues such as inadequate staff competency and attitude, and most importantly be available for public live streaming. Valley Park Farms in Vic and Manning Valley Free Range Eggs in NSW are 2 examples of egg producers who have live streaming web cam footage available, the public can see that the chickens do get outside and seem happy and healthy and will buy their product over a farm that has no transparency. It is not perfect but it is a positive start for animal welfare and a profitable business decision. With CCTV in slaughterhouses, this would expose the truth that the public are entitled to know and understand – that no slaughter can ever be humane. Even if every single animal died instantly with no pain, which will never be possible, every animal is still fearful and this is suffering beyond our comprehension. This transparency will change the public's entire concept of eating animals, and for me is the essence of why our government and Big Ag are trying to protect the outdated and cruel industry we have today. They are unable to see past current profits to a better way. For the people who will always eat animal products, they too want to see that animals are treated as well as current law allows. There is an undeniable growing demand for higher welfare produce. Instead of increasing efforts to cover up (eg this bill), our leaders and Big Ag must begin to listen.

b) An Independent Welfare Body be established, which develops policy and regulations for farm animals that is science based, recognises sentience and includes community input. This would align with society's expected standards that all animals be treated equally. This independent body would be responsible for compliance of existing and transitioning business's and general animal agriculture industry reform. The current advisory groups have a conflict of interest.

2. Marketing. I agree with the reform recommended by Voiceless, which I will copy here.

Voiceless believes a nationally consistent approach to labelling legislation is the best approach for honest welfare labelling and consumer choice, including:

- *a mandatory labelling regime for all animal products clearly indicating the farm production method;*
- *a uniform set of defined terms of farm production methods that are linked to uniform animal protection standards;*
- *a regulatory monitoring and enforcement system (through consumer protection legislation) that ensures compliance with labelling laws;*
- *an extensive public education campaign to assist consumers in understanding the various production standards and systems and the descriptions on the labels;*

- a 'traffic light' labelling system that differentiates between low, medium and high levels of animal welfare, also linked to the animal protection standards; and
- the placement of photos or images of animals on the products that reflect the animal production system used.

Effective, enforceable and nationally consistent truth in labelling legislation is the only way that consumers can make truly informed choices.

3. Law reform - see below*

These recommendations will work towards protecting farming business privacy, because they will have nothing to hide.

and the integrity of our biosecurity system and animal welfare outcomes, whether through law reform or other measures.

Biosecurity

- more funding, surveillance and consequences for incoming agricultural products, and people, at airports and shipping terminals.
- CCTV installed and inspections by an Independent Welfare body at all animal businesses
- reform of our current animal agriculture industry.

Welfare

*There is an overwhelming need to bring legislative change to improve the welfare of animals. As the committee will know, currently commercially farmed animals are exempt from anti-cruelty and duty of care standards in our POCTA Act. Thus current laws protect some species from cruelty and yet allows the same and worse cruelties to happen to other species because they are "commercial animals". The 2017 Victorian Animal Welfare Action Plan acknowledges that animals are sentient, and it is indisputable that this includes all mammals, birds and fish. Welfare regulations today legally allow a farmer to cut off a pigs tail with no anaesthetic, keep hens crammed in cages with no freedom to express normal behaviour but if these things were done to a dog or cat, it is an act of cruelty and punishable by law. The public have no problem recognising this is wrong, once they understand this reality and thanks to whistle-blowers and animal advocate groups, the truth is getting out there.

Our standards and guidelines for livestock are not even mandatory, thus do not even provide a minimum standard of protection for farm animals.

And yet instead of addressing these insufficient laws which are out of touch with community expectations, this parliament is conducting an inquiry into how to punish those who expose cruelty and not those that are responsible for it.

My recommendations are:

Short term.

- Support whistle-blowers who expose cruelty and increase penalties for those responsible for that cruelty
- Make current standards and guidelines for livestock mandatory and increase funding for compliance
- Immediate transparency of all animal business to the public
- Legislate for truthful marketing of animal products
- Establish an independent welfare body to start developing farm animal welfare standards and guidelines.

Medium term

- Roll out honest and science based education on the current horrific realities of animal agriculture , the harm it is doing to the environment, lack of sustainability and the accepted fact that consuming animals is not necessary to be healthy at all stages of life. Education should be wide based – incorporated into school curriculums, parenting programs, tertiary institutions, through advertising, and promoted to the general public. Nutritional standards to reflect the known benefits of plant based diets.
- The independent welfare body along with Government and Big Ag to support livestock farmers to transition to plant based and sustainable products.

Long term vision

Victorian agriculture industry supporting a majority plant based eating population, exporting our highly regarded foods to the world, unimaginable benefits flowing through – new industry and employment, healthier community with reduced healthcare costs to the government, and overall a kinder and happier Victoria.

For the minority who still choose to eat animals, these animals will be farmed in a completely transparent environment allowing them the five freedoms, have pain relief for any deemed necessary painful procedures which will be performed by a veterinarian, fed natural diets, all offspring will live and be able to stay with its mother, and all killing will be done on farm, in a fearless environment with 100 % guarantee that the animal experiences no fear or pain. Of course this is impossible and unviable. And that’s what frightens our current “powers that be”.

In Summary

I thank the committee for the opportunity to make a submission. I am a well-educated person who has been directly involved with animals and agriculture all my life, and for many years I didn’t question “beliefs” that it is Normal, Natural and Necessary to exploit animals, such untruths were indeed encouraged by our governments and food corporations. It wasn’t until I chose to be true to what I really knew about other sentient animals that I have come to the above conclusions. My single awakening to the inadequacy of our current animal agriculture industry will be replicated en masse in the near future and our community will demand change.

Government and Big Ag will protect our current system for as long as possible, as we see with this and other similar inquiries nationally, not unexpectedly in some cases succeeding with harsher penalties for whistle-blowers of animal cruelty.

Perhaps the Victorian Parliament will show true vision and progress, will embrace the inevitable change, rediscover and encourage kindness, will remove the conflict of interest with greedy corporations which are only interested in protecting over consumerism and profit, and will help livestock farmers transition to more sustainable products. This is the only way forward.

We must do better for our fellow animals, our planet and our future. We can start now by rejecting harsher penalties for Animal Rights Activism.