

2 August 2019

Email: aglawsinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Secretariat

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

My name is Meg Parkinson and my husband, and I are Victorian free range egg farmers. We also have a boarding kennels.

I have been involved in agricultural advocacy over the last 20 years or so. During that time I have held a number of positions including: Vice and Deputy President of Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF), President of VFF Egg Group; Chair of VFF Animal Welfare Committee; President of Free Range Egg and Poultry Australia (FREPA), and represented VFF on National Farmers Federation Biosecurity Committee (which included animal welfare).

I have also held various positions on government committees including: Victorian Animal Welfare Advisory Council (advising the Victorian Minister of Agriculture; now called Animal Welfare Advisory Committee) including being the Chair of Production Animal Taskforce; National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare (advising the Commonwealth Minister of Agriculture); member of Livestock committee of Australian Animal Welfare Strategy; involved in review of 3rd and 4th editions of Poultry animal welfare Code; and various other committees which include animal welfare.

During that time I was involved with another woman in setting up the quality assurance program, RangeCare for FREPA and in running it for around 15 years. This program predominantly certifies chicken meat farm, although some egg farms are involved.

Outside of agriculture, I am involved in animal welfare as a category C member of animal ethics committees, and various committees for my knowledge of animal welfare in gene technology.

These various positions have given me a deep knowledge of animal welfare and the animal rights industry in Victoria and Australia.

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of Meg Parkinson.

Meg Parkinson

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

The Terms of Reference under which this Committee is constituted are comprehensive and much appreciated.

Victorian egg farmers have had farm invasions since around 1994. At that time Animal Liberation Victoria (later the invasions were headlined as ‘Open Rescue’) invaded Happy Hens in Victoria many times. Some of the main members of the animal rights organisations of the time were on Government benefits, so used this as a reason not to pay penalties. These invasions continued over a long-time frameⁱ.

It is clear to me that most invasions by the various animal rights organisations are about getting media attention to themselves. In fact, they often call the police and the media themselves. If the media do not turn up, they walk out and/or take their own media pictures or videos and email them to the media organisations they think are most sympathetic to them.

So, it would be helpful if the Victorian Parliament ensured that the charitable status for organisations which impinge upon the privacy of individuals or businesses be revoked, where appropriate under Victorian Law. Where the appropriate law is Federal, I would like to see the Victorian Government lobby other States and Territories (and support at COAG and Ministerial Council) that the Commonwealth revoke the charitable status for organisations which choose to intrude upon the privacy of farmers or farm businesses as well as for associated industries such as abattoirs, transporters etc.

One of the criterion of this inquiry is whether to increase legal sanctions. An increase in such sanctions sends a powerful message that Parliament is not intimidated by people who do not feel obliged to comply with Victorian animal welfare law.

Therefore I would like to see Changes be made to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1986) to set the acceptable level of penalty and to ensure that the stealing of production animals is a cruelty offence.

The people who invade our farms are not concerned with animal welfare but animal rights. That is: they think animals should be treated like people not respected as the animals they are. That is why animal rights people want to defend animals in court and why we have the Barristers’ Animal Welfare Panel in Victoriaⁱⁱ.

I also have concerns around potential injury to farmers’ families and staff when the farms are invaded. Some of this is as a result of being in an unknown workplace, but some is due to the arrogance and aggression of the invaders. They taunt people and do not respect the farmers. They publish information about individuals and the farm which may not be true. In one case that I am aware of, they wore t-shirts with nasty messages outside the primary school of the children of the farm owners. They have threatened to injure the children and therefore forced schools to impose tough entry rules.

So, I would like to see changes be made to the Crimes Act (1958) to set the invasion of a farm and invasion of associated businesses as Criminal offences rather than Civil offences.

The terms of reference of this Committee mention biosecurity. One of the frustrations for egg farmers is that the animal rights people purposefully make ‘biosecurity precautions’, ie put on a disposable overall, while treating biosecurity as a joke. This is of concern – both around disease spread and around exporting. The egg industry has not been a large exporter in the past, but this is changing.

The invaders also treat the animals badly ie remove birds from sheds and keep them by themselves. Chooks are a flock animal; they are part of a pecking group. When birds are removed from their flock and taken out of the shed, they become stressed. They are also sometimes taken from an air-conditioned shed (usually because the invaders break in at night) to cold air. This also adds to their stress. If they are not handled correctly, they can break legs and wings and night invasion wakes the chooks from their sleep. None of this makes a bird happy.

The legislation recently going through the Commonwealth Parliament on the Criminal Code Amendment (Agricultural Protection) Bill 2019 and the new legislation in both NSW and Queensland are positives. They send clear messages to the community that those parliaments take unlawful invasions seriously. It would be positive to see similar legislation in Victoria.

Internationally, animal rights activists may be classified as terrorists in the USA due to their close links to known terrorists. There are known links from Australian organisations to these USA organisations. Voiceless brought Mr Will Potter to Australia from the US for a lecture tour. I attended one of the lectures.

I was shocked when he supported the actions of Earth Liberation Front (ELF), which is listed in the US as a terrorist organisation. He said that Australian animal rights organisations should form a relationship with the ELF. Since then, this organisation, which has a very broad definition of ‘earth’, has been working in Australiaⁱⁱⁱ.

The UK shows why it is important that strong penalties be implemented against animal rights activists. There are animal rights organisations in the UK which use terrible levels of intimidation against any organisations or people they do not like. It is untenable that people should be scared in their homes or have to check for bombs before starting their car. I am aware that they dug up a relation who had been buried in the nearby cemetery.

It was reported in the Weekly Times on 24 July 2019^{iv v} that a family is leaving their farm because of the stress they have been under by animal rights activists. This is well known to professional egg farmers. Many have been subject to such intimidation, as have their employees. As one farmer said: “I can’t legally intimidate someone without legal action being taken against me, so I don’t understand why they [animal activists] are receiving special treatment”.

These activists are not animal welfare experts. They are pushing a political point of view – usually a vegan view – by intimidating farmers and by misinforming and manipulating the public with the complicity of media people who either share their view or using the information for their own purposes.

They also misinform school students by doing things such as give out false information or scaring them (eg showing a bucket of red liquid and referring to it as blood) outside the

school gates or via a teacher who uses their position of trust to press their political view. Farmers, on the other hand, act like the normal citizens they are.

Egg farmers are members of local communities. They donate eggs for Lions or Rotary barbeques and for school events. They buy their supplies from local shops, where possible, and buy Australian feed. They sell to local shops as well as supermarkets, so eggs of the Public's choice are easily available. They employ locals. They do not force their views on people by intimidating them.

One of the furphy's being spread by animal right's activists is that "if there was nothing to be hidden then the activists would not have any reason to be entering properties". There is nothing being hidden. The activists enter farms for their own personal or political reasons. It is about them not the farms or the farmers.

We had two activists walk onto our farm one afternoon. When I asked them if I could help them, the young men said "We thought we would take a couple of chooks". I found this incredible. I was even more flabbergasted as they had to climb our farm gate to get in as I was not well, so I had locked the gate and was on my way to lie down. However, it was clear by the way that they kept looking at our dogs, that the young men feared our two Border Collie dogs. They left without the chooks. I found the attitude of these young men quite arrogant.

Another furphy is "This issue could be resolved with the installation of cameras". This shows how little people saying this understand that farms have people on them. Would the people on this Committee, or Victorians in general, like to have cameras recording everything they do at work? I think that this is unlikely. It would certainly not assist with getting Australians, who are accustomed to their privacy, to work on farms.

There has been controversy around the use of the law to limit unlawful use of devices to record people. In Victoria, it is already a contravention of the Victorian listening devices legislation and can result in up to two years' imprisonment or substantial fines. However, this has not been applied to activists breaking into sheds and leaving cameras to record without the permission of the farmer. I would like to see this legislation reviewed to include such break ins and recording^{vi} in the various Acts as appropriate^{vii}. This is particularly because what they say or 'record' may not actually be true.

Many times, the so-called information is not as it is purported. The videos and pictures have been photo-shopped or have not been recorded in Australia. Egg farmers know this as we can see that the birds and/or the sheds and/or the cages are wrong for Australia.

Professional Egg farmers contribute to the Victorian economy by producing 28% of the nation's eggs and exporting them around the country and overseas. Export markets are increasing due to our safe food and strong biosecurity.

The invasion of farms by animal rights activists, and the media attention they get, does not help our international reputation. This is especially so in Asian markets. Our Asian neighbours expect that Government will address illegal activities such as people invading farms to cause food safety and biosecurity problems. The people trying to export find it difficult to explain that some of our parliamentarians are sympathetic to such activities^{viii}

So it would be appreciated if the Victorian Parliament made it clear in plain English that it does not support the intimidation of farmers and their employees and families, or the stress of the chooks or the imperilling of the safety of the eggs and biosecurity.

Egg farms in Australia have the lowest emission levels of any animal industry and cage farms have the lowest level of any egg production system. This information is available on the National Pollutant Inventory data website^{ix}. This website shows emission levels by industry, sub-industry, region and other criteria.

We would like to see Parliament makes it clear, in plain English, that it does not support the intimidation of farmers and their employees and families, or the stress of the chooks or imperilling of the safety of the eggs and biosecurity. This would send a very strong message.

ⁱ <http://www.openrescue.org/archives.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://bawp.org.au/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.news.com.au/news/eco-terror-threats-in-australia-on-the-rise/news-story/941defc1b4cb77cfcb1509666e16f0dc>

^{iv} <20190724 The Weekly Times farm invasion.pdf>

^{vi} [http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/PubStatbook.nsf/edfb620cf7503d1aca256da4001b08af/164CDBB997CF174BCA2571EE001E1DF0/\\$FILE/06-070a.pdf](http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/PubStatbook.nsf/edfb620cf7503d1aca256da4001b08af/164CDBB997CF174BCA2571EE001E1DF0/$FILE/06-070a.pdf)

^{vii} [http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/LTObject_Store/LTObjSt5.nsf/DDE300B846EED9C7CA257616000A3571/D5D9C8D3F4D67A2CCA257761003D3453/\\$FILE/97-2sr002.pdf](http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/LTObject_Store/LTObjSt5.nsf/DDE300B846EED9C7CA257616000A3571/D5D9C8D3F4D67A2CCA257761003D3453/$FILE/97-2sr002.pdf)

^{viii} <https://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/news/national/greens-senator-janet-rice-says-farm-trespass-is-sometimes-necessary/news-story/ee7f2c8d90e2e0502b192668bbedabba>

^{ix} www.npi.gov.au