



**Victorian
Farmers
Federation**

Livestock

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

**Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament of Victoria**

2 August 2019

**Submission on behalf of Victorian Farmers Federation
Livestock Group**

Introduction

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) Livestock Group welcomes the opportunity to provide comment into the parliamentary inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture.

The VFF is Australia's largest state farmer organisation, representing over 5,000 Victorian farming businesses. Despite farming on only three per cent of Australia's available agricultural land, Victorians produce 30 per cent of the nation's agricultural product. The VFF Livestock Group represents the interests of the state's beef, sheep meat, wool and goat producers who contribute to Victoria's \$4.3billion meat industry and \$667million wool industry.

Victorian farmers have endured a multitude of challenges in recent years including bushfires, economic variability and climatic extremes, with some areas farming in dry conditions not seen since the Millennium Drought. Not only are Victorian farmers battling these challenging conditions to support their own families, but to also provide essential food and fibre to billions of people in Australia and around the world.

Adding to these challenges is the unnecessary stress of extreme animal rights activists, who feel it is their right to invade a farmer's property; trespassing not only on their place of business but also their family home. Unfortunately, the proximity of Victorian farms to highly-populated areas in Victoria is close, making many Victorian farms an easy target to coordinate and execute multiple infiltration events.

While we are fortunate to live in a country that promotes freedom of speech and encourages diversity, we also live in a country that does not condone criminal activity, bullying and harassment. The majority of people carrying out these invasive acts are adults, deemed by society to be responsible enough to vote, drive a car and to not partake in criminal behaviour.

Currently, Victorian farmers are offered little protection against deliberate acts of lawbreaking; trespassing and livestock theft during a farm invasion are not covered appropriately under Victoria's trespass and biosecurity laws. Both New South Wales and Queensland State Governments have introduced stronger penalties for trespassing, strengthening their state's biosecurity defence and security for their farmers.

This submission is not about suppressing individual beliefs and freedom of speech, it is about setting the course for a future that safeguards Victoria's biosecurity status, its food and fibre production and protects farming families against the actions of extreme animal rights activists.

Health and Safety Impacts

Farm invasions, and the threat of farm invasions, have a major impact on the health and wellbeing of farmers, their families and employees. According to Beyond Blue, farmers experience higher rates of stress and depression and in Australia; suicide rates for male farmers are significantly higher than the general population and non-farming rural males. Some VFF members have reported an increase in psychological distress due to the threat of farm invasion as their property is identified as an animal exploitation facility on the Aussie Farms Map. This map was released publicly in January 2019 by animal rights group, Aussie Farms.

Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in Australia. In 2018, according to the National Farm Injury Data Centre (NFIDC), there were eight fatalities due to an animal related on-farm injury; while a further 29 non-fatal injuries were reported as a direct animal related injury. While it could be assumed that a number of animal related injuries go unreported each year, when people are working with unpredictable animals, the safety risk on-farm only increases.

During an invasion event, livestock not used to having large groups of people storm their environment at once, may engage their natural fight or flight instinct. This puts any untrained and inexperienced individual in direct risk of suffering severe injury or death. Not only do animal activists put themselves at risk while trespassing, but could put the farmer, their family members and/or employees at risk whilst they are attempting to negotiate the situation.

Any serious injury or death occurred on a farmer's property or in their yards would have long-lasting mental health impacts for the farmer and their family. It is important to note that as most farmers' place of business is also their family home, young children are at risk of being impacted, either psychologically or physically by forceful demonstrations.

It is important to recognise that health and safety impacts extend beyond the farm gate. Farmers transporting their livestock or having their stock transported by a carrier, have reported acts of bully and harassment by activists whilst in transit. Incidents include, blockades at point of delivery or at significant stop points such as the Swan Street Bridge traffic light intersection. This is not only a stressful and alarming time for the driver but causes flow on affects for driver fatigue management and animal welfare concerns with delays. There is also a significant safety issue for pedestrians, as well as activists, putting their arms and hands into the stock crate to try and touch the animals.

There have also been reports of working dogs being let out of truck dog boxes unrestrained into high traffic situations, cars brake-checking livestock trucks and filming of trucks from bridges, overpasses or at point of delivery, often accompanied by defamatory language when posted online. Due to the fear of harassment and vandalism, farmers and livestock carriers are now moving towards plain body trucks with little to no signwriting. This not only prevents a legal business from advertising and being proud about their role in the food supply chain, but creates a feeling that livestock transportation is a shameful or illegal practice.

Activists who invade a livestock property also put themselves in unnecessary risk of contracting a zoonotic disease, a disease that is spread from animals to humans. Zoonotic diseases such as Q fever and leptospirosis are spread through contact with infected wool, hair, faeces, milk, soiled straw or feedstuff or by ingesting contaminated dust particles. Q fever is a debilitating disease causing symptoms such as vomiting, headaches and muscle pain, endocarditis and chronic fatigue and body weakness with ongoing medical treatment.

Animal Welfare and Biosecurity

Australian farmers, who produce red meat and fibre under world-leading animal welfare regulations, often in times of hardship, value their livestock and genuinely care for their management and handling throughout the supply chain.

As food producers, every three years Australian livestock farmers are required to undertake training assessments to remain accredited under the National Livestock Property Assurance (LPA) program. This is in addition to the three thousand LPA audits conducted annually. This means that every three years, farmers must review learnings on a number of elements relating to livestock handling including treating animals safely and responsibly, maintaining biosecurity practices and adhering to animal welfare practices.

These learnings are in addition to legislation including the Livestock Management Act 2010, Livestock Disease Control Act 1994, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 (POCTA) and Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines.

These acts and industry programs are in place to defend Victoria's livestock industry from an Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) outbreak, such as Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), minimise animal health issues and maintain market access. Industry vulnerability is heightened by a lack of awareness and incomplete adoption of best practice management including traceability, disease surveillance and farm biosecurity.

Under the Livestock Disease Control Act 1994, livestock owners must provide a vendor declaration before livestock are moved, must not remove an identification tag unless the animal is being slaughtered or disposed of and must have a property identification code (PIC) for the property in which livestock are kept. A failure to comply with any of these regulations carries 60 penalty units each. Earlier this year, an animal activist who stole a goat during a raid was fined only one dollar for removing an identification tag and not having a PIC, both are regulations designed to improve traceability of livestock. It has been well documented that the economic impact of a large-scale FMD outbreak in Australia is estimated to be \$52 billion over 10 years. There is a greater chance of controlling a disease outbreak and minimising the costly effects, if livestock are able to be quickly traced and identified. A charge of one dollar neither captures the significance of the offence nor act as a deterrent for noncompliance.

People are one of the biggest threats to biosecurity. It is well-established that during the 2001 UK FMD outbreak, which resulted in the loss of more than six million head of sheep, cattle and pigs, that people were one of the biggest contributors to the spread of disease. When activists enter and move around a property, the threat to on-farm biosecurity is high.

They can spread disease, pest and weeds via their clothes, footwear and vehicles. If animals are stolen from a property during an invasion, such as the goat theft from Gippy Goat in Gippsland, often these animals are unable to return to their herd or property because the biosecurity status of the animal is unknown.

Activists should not be able to conduct invasive acts under the guise of being the judge and jury of animal agriculture. Victoria has well-established mechanisms and legislation, such as POCTA to investigate and prosecute any suspected misconduct. Footage being withheld for political gain and not immediately provided to the authorities only serves to exacerbate negative animal welfare situations. The VFF Livestock Group fully supports the intent of POCTA, which is to prevent cruelty to animals, to encourage the considerate treatment of animals and to improve the level of community awareness about the prevention of cruelty to animals.

Through their desperate and inexperienced actions during a farm trespass event, animal rights activists directly put animals at risk of negative animal welfare outcomes.

Security camera footage from the farm invasion event at Gippy Goat clearly shows activists stealing a goat and putting this animal unrestrained into the back of an SUV. Animals travelling on uneven and unsuitable ground, unrestrained in confined spaces, have the potential to be knocked around in transit putting, the animal at risk of injury and undue stress. This action also creates the potential for a motor vehicle accident should the driver become injured or distracted while driving; increasing the injury risk to passengers in the vehicle and other road users.

Additionally, footage shown on news media programs during the scheduled national animal rights protest in April, showed young calves on a Queensland property being inadvertently driven into fences because a group of activists, whilst invading a farm, tried to capture an animal in order to rescue it. This does not offer protection to a naturally herd-dependant animal and only serves to increase stress and injury risk to the animal in the process of trying to contain it.

Conclusion

Laws are developed to protect people and communities and currently the Victorian farming community does not feel protected against farm invasions and the threat of farm invasions.

Farmers should be able to go about their legal business of producing quality food and fibre for consumers without the threat of animal activists. This begins with tougher penalties for extreme actions of activists including trespassing, livestock theft and vandalism. These are well-planned and deliberate acts of criminal behaviour and should be treated as such regardless of intent.

The VFF Livestock Group recommends that biosecurity legislation and associated penalties be increased for Victoria to align with New South Wales and Queensland, carrying hefty fines, including on the spot fines for individuals and groups during an invasion and imprisonment for farm invasion crime. VFF Livestock Group also recommends the State Government advocate for the removal of the Aussie Farms Map.

Yours Sincerely,



Leonard Vallance
President
Victorian Farmers Federation Livestock Group