

SUBMISSION INTO INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISM ON VICTORIAN AGRICULTURE

I note that it is the Economy and Infrastructure Committee undertaking this Inquiry but Animal Agriculture is also dependent upon animal ethics. I am one of the many Australians who cares deeply about how animals are treated. I also happen to be 60 years old and live in a rural community. I have empathy for all animals which includes humans and also farmers.

I appreciate that business owners want to get on with doing their job unhindered. However, I am becoming increasingly concerned about the systemic animal cruelty in animal agriculture in Australia. The suffering to individual animals, and on such a grand scale particularly in intensive factory farms all in the name of profit is beyond barbaric. When a business model is based on profits taking priority over animal welfare change is needed.

It is 2019 and to accept that any animal can live their entire existence confined in a cage and deprived of the ability to perform natural bodily functions such as turning around and call it legal is morally wrong. Just because something is legal does not mean it is morally right or that it has a social licence. Compassionate caring people who want to expose these wrongs and bring them to the light of day are merely doing what the industry and regulators themselves should be doing.

ROUTINE PRACTICES

The following are just some examples of how animals are routinely and legally treated in farming practises in Victoria.

Hens in battery cages who live their entire miserable lives in a space the size of an A4 piece of paper; who can never stretch their wings; who never even have the ability to touch solid ground, (as they perpetually stand/lay on wire); who never breathe fresh air or feel the warmth of the sun; their bodies sexual organs abused until they are spent; then so often roughly handled as they are transported to their gruesome death.

And day-old male chicks who are considered waste as they cannot lay eggs are minced up alive or suffocated to death and this is considered not only legal but humane. When profits are involved animal welfare always takes a back seat. Even allowing acceptable levels of dead and dying animals leaves these tragic lives as just merely a figure to be reported. Their life had absolutely no value whatsoever, these sentient animals are treated no differently than a unit of stock on a shelf. And in the case of male chicks their use by date is 1 day old.

The Australian Pork industry itself said they were phasing out sow stalls by 2017 but they have not. Pigs can spend up to 115 days in a sow stall (a cage so confining that it is the same length and width as the average female pig.) These poor animals cannot even turn around. Please give that some thought for a moment - being trapped in a metal device so that you cannot even turn your body for almost 4 months. And you are lying on cold often wet concrete and getting pressure sores into the bargain. Then the pigs go from the sow stall to the farrowing crate where again they can't even turn around and are denied access and the ability to nurture their young. Their next stop is to a mating stall where they are confined again so that they can have their sexual organs manipulated to start the whole vicious circle all over again. This is not a life but misery for every single one of these poor female pigs.

Then there are Boar stalls where the boars also live a miserable life of confinement, only to be let out when his sexual organs are needed. Their entire life is a miserable existence.

Ducks in intensive duck farming facilities are denied access to water so that they can clean themselves. You would be familiar with the saying "like a duck to water" only they are denied this very basic need. They can't groom or clean themselves, something that I would have thought in itself would cause a biosecurity risk. If you are concerned about biosecurity then you should be concerned about keeping animals in these living conditions where the stench of faeces and ammonia is high and where the use of antibiotics is necessary to stave off disease. You should also be concerned about workers having to work in these conditions. Ducks are born to fly and wade on water, but they are denied both these instinctive and basic requirements. They only get to live for 6 weeks crammed into these sheds, amongst dead and dying bodies. There is not one moment of joy in their short lives. Born with wings to fly but never being able to do so, born with webbed feet for wading in water but never being able to do so.

Most people think that dairy cows live an idyllic life on a farm with rolling green hills. As with all advertising in the animal agriculture sector where happy farm animals are depicted romping around the fields this could not be further from the truth. Look a little closer and you will see that these farms too are nothing more than intensive animal agriculture where profit comes before the basic needs and welfare of the cows. The females spend their lives being exploited for the milk meant for their babies, their tender breasts pumped twice daily. I drive past a dairy regularly and the condition of some of these poor cows with ribs and hips protruding and their heads down in despondency is heartbreaking to see. And even more heartbreaking is seeing the baby calves being born only to be torn away from their mother on the same day. For nine long months she has waited for her calf and she doesn't even get to spend one day with them. The male calves are carted off within their first week of life and killed merely because they are considered a waste product. Many female calves who will not join a herd are also killed. And if you are a female calf to survive thus far you get to go through the same cycle of abuse and deprivation year in and year out as your ailing mother whose bodies are spent at the age of approximately 5 years, rather than a normal lifespan of 25 years. How any female of the human species can condone this treatment is beyond me.

These are just a small example of the standard, routine, legal, yet cruel, barbaric and morally wrong treatment of animals in animal agriculture. Then there are the breaches of the archaic laws that are supposed to protect these poor animals. And the total lack of scrutiny by the industry itself. And it is usually only thanks to brave whistle-blowers that these breaches are ever exposed.

Animal Agriculture is an industry in denial about the way it treats sentient beings. An industry that is also in denial about the effects of animal agriculture on climate change; being the primary cause of land clearing and deforestation on the east coast of Australia; about its contribution to droughts and the lack of rain, its contribution to dead zones and to polluting the waters of the Great Barrier Reef; its unsustainable use of resources such as water, using grain to feed animals that could feed the starving, decimating our natural ecosystems and wildlife causing species extinction and pollution from all the waste and excrement. Government should be helping this industry to reform to better represent community expectations.

ANIMAL CRUELTY IN VICTORIA

Only this week an illegal abattoir on the outskirts of Melbourne has been exposed thanks to an animal activist or brave whistle-blower providing disturbing video footage. See link here:

<https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-02/video-footage-reveals-alleged-cruelty-at-illegal-slaughterhouse/11375854?pfmredir=sm>

As well as animal cruelty and welfare breaches there appears to be biosecurity breaches too. The industry should realise that exposure of this is a good thing and the animal activist/ whistle-blower has taken a personal risk to expose this and should be given praise for his/her actions.

In June this year horrific footage emerged of workers torturing and abusing hens at one of the largest egg-producing facilities in Australia at Bridgewater Poultry farm in Victoria. See link here:

<https://www.news.com.au/technology/science/animals/secret-video-reveals-horrific-abuse-of-hens-inside-victorian-egg-farm/news-story/dd429e36eb2e210fc702c78663f6961d>

The chickens at the farm were filmed being kicked, thrown to the ground and having their necks broken for fun. All whilst staff were seen laughing at the animals as they were writhing in pain. I defy anybody to watch the footage and not feel sickened by it. These people doing these atrocities should not be allowed anywhere near animals again.

Bridgewater Poultry also faced controversy back in March after having to recall a number of products due to a potential salmonella outbreak. One of the Bridgewater Poultry owners is Victorian Farmers Federation Egg Group president Tony Nesli. He told the publication he was "horrified" by the video, adding the contractors were hired following the disease outbreak. "Trying to get people to go into a quarantined farm is like trying to find gold nuggets in pig sh*t," he said. "We in the egg industry are at the mercy of only a handful of people who are prepared to do this job." This should speak loudly to the industry that not only is the extreme animal abuse wrong but that perhaps they need to totally overhaul their practices and workplace conditions.

It was also thanks to secret footage back in 2016 that shocking instances of animal cruelty were exposed at one of Victoria's oldest abattoirs Riverside Meats abattoir.

And this wasn't the first-time action had to be taken against this abattoir. See link here

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/secret-video-inside-victorias-riverside-meats-abattoir-reveals-shocking-abuse-20161123-gsw1hx.html>

Calves were seen being beaten and stabbed, pigs being repeatedly shot, before taking six long minutes to die. The disturbing footage also shows animals being prodded with electric stunning devices on the neck, face and head, instead of on the side of the head.

Animals Australia executive director Glenys Oogjes said there was an "obvious culture of violence" at the abattoir with the vision showing "equipment designed to reduce suffering instead being used as torture devices inflicting dreadful cruelty". "A stunning device in the wrong hands, or used incorrectly, becomes a weapon. The pain and extended suffering endured by these animals is totally inexcusable," she told the Bendigo Advertiser.

The extended suffering to these animals was being done by employees of the animal agriculture industry and the industry either being totally unaware or simply not taking action. This is totally inexcusable and if not for the actions of animal activists/ whistle-blowers this would not have been exposed.

The treatment of pigs in abattoirs in Victoria has also been brought into question after footage obtained by activists/whistle-blowers shows the reality of being gassed to death. See

link here <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/animal-liberation-victoria-claims-pigs-suffer-horrific-deaths-when-killed-using-carbon-dioxide/news-story/c3194210f834052c9bc3b017a6304e8b>

"The industry tells the public that gas chambers are a humane slaughter method and wants us to believe that the pigs gently fall asleep, however nothing could be further from the truth."

One abattoir said on its website that it is export and RSPCA accredited, and activists agree the business' processes are considered "best practice". How can such cruelty ever be considered "best practise" and in this instance it is clear that this organisation is not advocating for all animals great and small.

THE NEED FOR WHISTLEBLOWERS

If caring citizens who are concerned about animal welfare don't expose these horrors that are happening in intensive farming facilities, in feedlots and in abattoirs across Victoria then who is going to expose them.

If the animal agriculture industry was transparent; had CCTV footage in facilities which was publicly available; if laws were just; if animal cruelty offences were taken seriously; and if animals were not being harmed in the most horrific ways there would simply be no need for animal activists to expose these injustices. They are doing so because authorities are doing nothing to address the inherent animal cruelty. This is an industry that derives its profit from the death of animals. The people employed to execute these deaths naturally become desensitized to it. This is not a pleasant task to have to undertake for your employment. This also leads to broader problems of violence in the community. All these issues need to be addressed.

Many whistle-blowers in the animal agriculture industry are staff or ex staff who cannot stomach witnessing the cruelty any longer. These workers are often subjected to cruel treatment themselves by way of bullying and harassment. They are the ones that should be offered protection. They are the ones that should be encouraged to step up and speak out and this would go a long way to helping put an end to cruelty being rampant in the industry.

Why should this industry be treated any differently from any other? If this industry was accountable for their own actions, not propped up by taxpayer funds, and transparent about how they go about their business then there would simply be no need for members of the community to be concerned. If animals were not routinely kept in confined spaces, and if animals weren't having their bodies mutilated without painkillers, and if animals weren't being deprived, and if there wasn't regular incidents of animal cruelty being reported, then there would simply be no need for animal activists/whistle-blowers. Instead of giving up their valuable free time to right wrongs, they could simply get on with enjoying their lives as is all they want for other species of animals, to have a quality of life and not just be considered a unit of stock with monetary value but a living feeling being that deserves to be treated with kindness and respect.

I am not aware of any activity by animal activists in Victoria where any person has been harmed, any property has been damaged, any home has been entered, or any biosecurity incidents have occurred. In all the photos I have seen depicted in the media of animal activists at rural properties they are wearing biohazard suits and appear to be taking extreme care not to cause any biosecurity breaches as the animals are their main concern. Whereas with farmers the main concern is their profit. Where are concerns for biosecurity with the filthy conditions found in many intensive farming sheds and the toxic effluent they produce.

I have also not heard of any animal welfare concerns with the actions of animal activists/whistle-blowers. That is their primary aim after all to alleviate suffering to animals. Whereas the primary aim of animal agriculture is to profit from the use and death of animals.

There needs to be transparency in these industries. How can consumers make informed decisions when animal agriculture industries operate under a veil of secrecy and deception? When these industries produce false and misleading advertising campaigns, when these industries use deceptive names to make it more palatable to the public, like pork/bacon instead of pig flesh, or drumsticks instead of the delicate leg of a dead sentient chicken, or the word process instead of slaughter. These are all purely deceptive marketing ploys to take away the cruel reality of what animal agriculture has become. And this is all not only totally unnecessary but harming our planet.

I implore you for a moment to just think if you were one of these individual animals, (and don't forget we too are animals) confined for your entire life in a cage or crowded shed, living a miserable life without being able to stretch or exercise, without fresh air to breath and without the warmth of the sun on your skin, dead and dying bodies to step over, having your body parts removed without painkillers, having your body denied basic necessities and natural behaviours, let alone any enjoyment in life, would you not want someone, somewhere to be looking out for you? Would you not want someone enlightening others about your plight? Would you not want someone speaking on your behalf and seeking change to a better and kinder way of living?

That is exactly what compassionate animal activists and whistle-blowers are doing, they are concerned about this socially unacceptable treatment of animals that is happening on a massive scale both legal and illegal. And it is happening behind closed doors and without scrutiny.

Farmers are a vital part of the community and we depend on them to feed our nation and contribute to our export market but they also need to be sustainable and Government should be helping them to transition to more sustainable methods of farming and to methods that don't involve cruelty to animals or destruction to our environment. Industries need to change with the times and keep up with community expectations and science.

Kind and caring community members are also left to take a stance on other industries such as protecting the environment or our diminishing wildlife. These actions are taking place because of the inaction by authorities. Like with inaction on Climate Change; protection of the Great Barrier Reef; Coal extraction operations and drilling for oil in sensitive areas; water mining and allocations; overfishing; pollution caused by factory farming; whaling in our waters; you cannot stop members of the community, who also include farmers and who are also tax payers from speaking up, peacefully protesting and having their say in a supposed democratic society. And also acting as whistle-blowers when they see an injustice; when they see environmental destruction; when they see species extinction; when they see unchecked cruelty; when they see a culture of abuse; when they see unthinkable pain and suffering.

If it were not for whistle-blowers the live-baiting in the Greyhound Racing Industry would not have come to light. If it were not for whistle-blowers the shocking conditions on live export ships and the barbaric treatment these poor animals are subjected to in foreign countries would not have come to light. I have praise for anyone who reveals or creates awareness of abuse on farms, or destruction to the environment. It is people like this who have created societal change in the past. And they will continue to do so until there is positive change. These acts of animal cruelty in particular have damaged the International reputation of Australia. I have heard from overseas sources that Australia is becoming renowned for its

animal cruelty, a reputation we could do well without. All these incidents of cruelty in abattoirs and on farming operations are only adding to this bad reputation.

We already have trespass laws that allow for prosecution of people that break the law. We already have laws for theft of property and damage to property so why is there any need for special treatment for animal activists/whistle-blowers and caring members of the community who only want to make a difference and see a kinder more compassionate world.

The only way to prevent and deter actions by animal activists/whistle-blowers is to treat animals better by taking firm positive steps to identify and stop the animal cruelty at its source. Animal cruelty laws need to be consistent across all species. Farm animals are exempt from the laws that protect domestic animals, yet a pig, duck, chicken, sheep, goat or cow feels exactly the same pain as a dog or cat. Animal welfare laws are totally inadequate when you can cut body parts off an animal without any pain relief. They feel fear and grief and sorrow and also happiness and joy. The Government needs to take action by assisting the animal agriculture industry to become more transparent and less dependent on cruel animal practices to make a profit. CCTV cameras need to be installed in all abattoirs, feedlots and factory farms or intensive animal agriculture facilities. Farming Codes of Practice need to be mandatory not voluntary.

There is overwhelming evidence that consumers want transparency and animal cruelty addressed and want businesses to be sustainable. Victoria can lead by example by enforcing transparency and strengthening laws against animal cruelty and make examples of those in the industry who take advantage of defenceless animals who cannot protect themselves from harm. Not just in animal agriculture but across all spectrums of industry. There is a growing number of incidents of intentional cruelty to wildlife also and this needs to be stopped. Strong laws protecting all animal species and tougher penalties is what is needed. And assistance given for farmers to transition to sustainable farming methods that does not entail even more death and suffering with changes in the climate.

Victoria could be seen as a leader in animal welfare and acknowledge the wonderful contribution of animal activists/whistle-blowers towards the greatest social movement of our time.

Susie Hearder

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2 August 2019