

Submission for the Inquiry into the impact of animal rights activism on Victorian agriculture

Many historical social justice movements have successfully raised community awareness of issues by drawing public attention, implementing change. Changes to immoral practices often occur via practices that appear confrontational or 'disobedient'.

Since the age of enlightenment and the establishment of our democratic institutions there have been several moral revolutions. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we grappled with the issue of slavery. In Australia we practiced 'blackbirding' even in the twentieth century. Early in the twentieth century suffragettes demanded the right to vote. Eventually we also gave our indigenous peoples the right to vote. One of the moral questions we have grappled with is our relationship to and our treatment of non-human animals. Societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals date back hundreds of years. Animal rights and welfare activists believe that in their capacity to feel joy and to feel pain, animals are just like us. Their belief is one backed by science. They believe they have the right not to be exploited for our convenience or for our pleasure. The single aim of activists attending farms and other places where animals are mistreated and harmed is to expose the inherent animal cruelty – particularly in the cases of 'farmed' animals, who are exempt from the laws that protect our domestic animals.

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

Unauthorized activity on Victorian farms can be classified as covert or overt activity. Covert activity has been undertaken now over many years and is mostly undetected by Victorian farmers. Investigators' goals are simply to document cruel and harmful practices that impact the wellbeing of animals that are supposedly in the farmers' 'care'. Often, the farmers are unaware that they have been the subject of an investigation until after the evidence has been released - evidence that brings community awareness to practices that are done in secret, behind closed doors and often against welfare standards which are already just mediocre at best.

More recently some activists have become frustrated by the inaction of the RSPCA and government when it comes to animal welfare and have conducted more overt unauthorized actions. Still, when engaging in these actions, activists have never approached farmer's homes or attempted to engage their children and families with threatening behaviour – this concern appears to be media hype.

The existing legislation prohibits both types of action and the penalties are severe. The police have thus far wisely resisted calls to prosecute individuals participating in large demonstrations. Where there have been arrests, penalties have been minor, which has caused outrage amongst some farming communities. However what they fail to comprehend is that severe prosecution would come at a significant cost to taxpayers and cause even more economic damage to the community, as many of the protestors are gainfully employed in professions such as teaching, mental health care, or medicine – in contrast to a stereotypical view that activists are unemployed. The vast majority of people attending places where animals are farmed are employed, spending their 'spare time' acting in accordance with their values – most of which are actually aligned with community standards that support and advocate for humans as well as animals – they are good people living and working in our communities, often advocating for disadvantaged humans as well as animals.

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

In 2016, the Productivity Commission suggested that the current process for setting standards for farm animal welfare “does not adequately value the benefits of animal welfare to the community”.

Activists protesting the mistreatment of animals should not incur civil liability as they are acting in good faith for the community. Animal cruelty wherever and however it takes place makes us less ‘human’ and comes with a definite social cost. Research demonstrates correlations between animal abuse and family violence. Governments regulate some forms of animals abuse such as backyard breeders of domestic animals (such as ‘puppy farms’) ... yet in our industrialised system of animal agriculture, ‘farmed’ animals do not have protection from the RSPCA, are abused large scale, and the cruelty is legal and protected.

The workplace health and safety and biosecurity risks, and potential impacts of animal activist activity on Victorian farms, to Victoria’s economy and international reputation.

The activities of investigators pose no more of a bio-security hazard than the standard practices of farmers and workers. The animals live in close confinement in their own excrement, in facilities where rats and mice are common. The existence of these facilities creates a biosecurity risk. Much of the covertly obtained footage of staff at these facilities reveals the inadequate level of biosecurity risk management. However SOME animal rights activists may benefit from education to ensure bio-security, and also the best handling of animals.

The organisation ‘Aussie Farms’ and its map of businesses engaging in animal do not publish or highlight any information that is not already available through Google search functions. Activists have never required such a map to access information of farm locations. ‘Aussie Farms’ does amazing work highlighting the plight of farmed animals and threatening to remove their charity status would be an act of censorship, when the goal must be transparency.

Compliance with disease control and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (POCTA).

The facilities create high risk conditions for the spread of disease between animals and also from animals to humans.

The POCTA affords farmed animals no protection as the animals used by industry are exempt from the legislation. Of note is that pigs are more intelligent animals than either cats or dogs, who are afforded such protections.

Types and prevalence of un-authorised activity and application of existing legislation.

The covert action is targeted at specific types of operations involving high concentrations of animals in confined spaces.

The overt actions seem to have been initiated by more radical elements of the activist community in response to serious cases of animal abuse at some facilities.

Recommendations on how the Victorian Government and industry could improve protections for farmers' privacy, businesses, and the integrity of our biosecurity system and animal welfare outcomes, whether through law reform or other measures.

A 2019 report titled Australia's Shifting Mindset on Animal Welfare commissioned by the federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources suggests it's most Australians who care about animal welfare. The report found 95% of respondents viewed farm animal welfare with concern and 91% wanted reform to address it.

Reforms must include:

- CCTV in all slaughterhouses, to ensure transparency and subsequent improvement of practice
- Mandatory codes of practice to improve welfare of farmed animals
- Support for workers transitioning away from animal agriculture
- Farmed animals to be covered by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (POCTA)
- The recognition of farmed animals as sentient beings who feel fear and pain and suffer, just as humans do
- An independent office of animal protection – instead of the current arrangement whereby the industry abusing animals is part of the regulatory system for their welfare standards. These standards should represent rigorous scientific research and represent evidence of community values for the welfare of 'farmed' animals

Conclusion

Activists understand that convincing people that animals are deserving of moral consideration may be a long and difficult task, and that many people earn their living through meeting the demand our society creates for meat and dairy products. They also understand that the industry makes a significant contribution to the economy. However, there is a significant opportunity for them to make the same contribution far more efficiently. Regardless of whether we cease using animals as a food source, people still need to eat. Transitioning to sustainable and ethical agriculture will produce the same calories and protein for consumers with less land inputs, less water inputs, and without any ethical question over the suffering of sentient animals such as cows, chickens or pigs. Further, most people working in slaughterhouses suffer from significant levels of traumatic stress, and the traumatic impact can often reach their families through domestic and family violence.