

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Bairnsdale—Tuesday, 20 August 2019

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WITNESSES

Mr John Buxton, Buxton Ag; and

Mr Chris Nixon.

The CHAIR: Good morning, all. I would like to welcome first of all the people in the gallery and the local Member for Gippsland East, Mr Tim Bull.

First of all, the Committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture, and the evidence is being recorded. Welcome to the public hearings of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, some comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Before you start you must state your name just for the Hansard record. We will allow you some time and then allow us some time to ask questions. Welcome.

Mr BUXTON: Okay, Mr Chair, Members of Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to present today

The CHAIR: Your name, please.

Mr BUXTON: Sorry, John Buxton. Can I start off by saying that I struggle to believe that these farm invasions really are about animal welfare. I just have a deep-seated feeling that there is another agenda behind this. What it is I cannot be sure. You can draw some assumptions, but it occurs to me that if you were really concerned about animal welfare, you would go about it in a different way. You do not get the best out of people by terrorising them; you use a much more cooperative approach and education.

I assume you have all read my submission, is that correct? Right-oh, so I will just make some quick notes and then I assume Chris will speak, and I am happy to answer questions.

We are very lucky to live in a free, peaceful, democratic society, and everyone should have the right to go about their lawful business without fear of threat or intimidation. It is a very precious thing, peace and harmony, and we need to defend it because if we lose it, it will be very hard to get it back. People deserve to feel that the law will protect them, and in my submission you will note that I make reference to the lady who was the most prominent I suppose in relation to the Gippy Goat invasion.

I thought it was very telling that—there is an article in the *Age* which I have highlighted here, and it was on *ABC Landline* too, where she was interviewed—she was being stalked. So it is a classic case I think of the dangers of taking the law into your own hands. It is not to be recommended, in my view, or encouraged by anyone. If people feel that the law is not able or is unwilling to protect them, the chances of them taking action—taking remedies themselves—increase, and once a spark lights a fire it can be very hard to put it out. We have seen it in other parts of the world, and we have seen it with what was known as the Cronulla riots in Sydney. Australia has been a very peaceful, harmonious society and I think we need to value that, and I think we need to look after it.

Visual presentation.

Mr BUXTON: Adam Smith—I am actually quite interested in political philosophers and the great thinkers of the world. I do not get the time that I would like to to study them all, but I was having a bit of a read about some Adam Smith stuff the other day and I came across this: *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1762. Now, Adam Smith is known as the founder of modern economics, but he was actually a moral philosopher first and foremost. I am quoting here:

The first and chief design of every system of government is to maintain justice; to prevent the members of a society from inroaching on one anothers property, or seizing what is not their own. The design here is to give each one the secure and peacable possession of his own property. {The end proposed by justice is the maintaining men in what are called their perfect rights.} When

this end, which we may call the internal peace, or peace within doors, is secured, the government will next be desirous of promoting the opulence of the state.

I find that very interesting. And you know, if you think about it, what sort of times did Adam Smith live in? I think it would be fair to assume that conditions were not as they are today, and for a lot of people there would have been a lot more trauma and people would have felt a lot less safe. So I just think that is a very telling little piece, that.

So in summary of that section, I have written, 'The civic glue and the culture that maintains the peaceful and harmonious society can be a fragile thing. These attacks will build resentment and anger in the community that could boil over if the provocation continues and the justice system continues to demonstrate a bias towards the perpetrators. The attacks on farms and the meat processing plants, in my view, are more than just a tax on individual people and businesses. I see them as a direct attack on the civic glue and the culture of our peaceful, harmonious society and the right for people to go about their lawful business. Maintaining the peace should be the Government's highest priority'.

If I can now turn to animal welfare on our farm, I have brought along a bit of show-and-tell here. This is our Livestock Production Assurance folder, which lives in the metal cabinet in the shearing shed, and it contains all of the elements of livestock production, known as LPA, which is the national livestock industry on-farm quality assurance program. I put a fair bit of time into putting this together. You will see, in the front there, there is a colour code for the different sections of it. It covers all the things that we do on the farm, and everything that we do is either recorded here or on a computer—everything: chemical inventory, animal treatments, chemical inventory, pasture chemical inventory, preparation of livestock for transport, fertiliser applications, biosecurity plan, livestock transactions and movements, animal welfare, property risk assessment and our certificates for having passed the examinations in animal welfare et cetera.

I will not go through all the details of the individual elements, as they are called in the LPA, but I will turn to the Australian animal welfare standards and guidelines and I will come back to that in a minute. You will note that I have spoken about our animal health program and our livestock breeding program. Mr Chairman, I will go through this in some detail if I may. This is a process that has evolved over time. It gets changed if circumstances change or new knowledge is discovered, and ours has changed quite a lot over the years as new knowledge has come to the fore. And the whole process is about setting animals up for a healthy life right from the beginning, the objective being to reduce the morbidity and mortality rate to the lowest level possible. Everything we do is directed at that objective.

So it starts before a lamb is born. We are due to start lambing on 1 September; we are doing prelambing treatments at the end of this week. So the ewes get a treatment to kill off the internal parasites in them, and they get a vaccination so they give passive immunity to their lambs. Glanvac 6S covers all the clostridial diseases—tetanus, pulpy kidney, blackleg, black disease, malignant oedema and cheesy gland, which has another technical name which escapes me for the moment. That vaccine also has a bit of selenium in it and vitamin B12, so that is about plugging a little gap in some mineral deficiencies, which is quite critical for early growth in animals. The selenium was something we started using about 10 years ago when we found after some trials in the district that they were actually marginal for selenium and we got a response to it, so they got added to the program. So you see how it evolves. The same with the B12.

Then when the lambs are marked they get Gudair vaccine, which covers them for ovine Johne's disease, which is actually mycobacterium paratuberculosis, which is a wasting disease; it is related to TB. It came through this district in a firestorm in the 80s, and if we did not have the Gudair vaccine we would not be able to run sheep. It has put a stop to the losses for us. It did not do it immediately, but after a few years we just do not see it any more, thanks to the vaccine. It is a very expensive vaccine. It is a very dangerous vaccine to use—you have to be very careful with it—but it has done a good job. Then six weeks later the lambs get another Glanvac 6 booster and a selenium shot, a long-term one that will last up to three years, and after that they are pretty right.

Now, if you check the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines you will note that what we do there fits with that because it talks about setting up your animal health program to do exactly what we have done, and the breeding program. So in conjunction with all of that there is a breeding program. Once again, it is designed to select for sheep that thrive and survive in our environment, are robust and vigorous. We cull

heavily against what I call death traits. A death trait is something like big structural problems and an undershot jaw, so traits that inhibit an animal's ability to get around and get a meal; and dag score—believe it or not, the amount of manure on a merino sheep's bum is a heritable trait, so we select heavily against dag score.

We breed quite a lot of our own rams because that allows us to put enormous pressure on these survival traits. We have got 91 young rams born September 2018 that are coming up for evaluation in the next few weeks. We will keep five or six of those. So there are a lot of hurdles they have got to jump to get to play a role as a sire in the flock. They have got to pass all the survival traits, be free of death traits, show a very low fetal egg count—we actually get a dung sample out of them and we get it tested. There will be a huge range. There will be one with maybe 5000 eggs per gram down to nothing, and they might average 2500 eggs per gram, so we try and pick the rams that have a figure of less than 2500 grams, if that is the average, if you understand what I am saying. Does that make sense? Because we have learned from research that sheep have inherent resistance to internal parasites. So that reduces our dependence on chemical treatment. The less we can drench the longer our drenches remain effective for us because internal parasites have built up resistance, such as bacteria building up resistance to antibiotics. So that is something we guard against by keeping the drench regime—the treatment regime—to the absolute minimum, and it is targeted strategically, such as pre-lambing and weaning. A summer drench is when you get the highest level of knockdown, and the warmer weather kills off the larvae on the pasture.

Getting back to the breeding, we select for sheep that do not accumulate dags—dags being manure. Sheep with dirty backsides attract blowflies, get flyblown and are likely to die. And they are harder to look after; you have got to get in there and clean them up. We select for waterproof wool that is resistant to fleece rot and dermatitis, because those conditions will attract blowflies in warm, wet weather, so that is another death trait. As I have said, we select for sheep that are resistant to internal parasites. We select for sheep that have positive breeding values for muscle and fat, because this promotes vigour. Sheep with higher levels of body mass, I suppose—muscle and fat—can survive tougher times. They are more efficient converters, and they just thrive a lot better.

We monitor the flock for faecal egg counts and, as I have said, we use preventative treatments for internal parasites. Sheep are jetted, and that means we spray insecticide, mostly insect growth regulator, on them at times of the year when the blowfly activity is most likely and the sheep are most vulnerable. Once again, there are some issues around managing the products that we use. We do not use the same product all the time. We rotate them so we are limiting the exposure to that chemical and trying to keep that chemical relevant for us as long as we can.

Breeding selection actually gets a mention in the *Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines*—on page 9, dot point 10:

selection and breeding of sheep appropriate for the environment and the level of planned flock management to be provided

That is what we are doing. And then a bit further over in the guidelines, G1.1:

knowledge of local patterns of disease and disease prevention—

you know, everything we do fits with this.

In times of drought we carefully calculate rations, and we get advice from an animal nutritionist or a veterinarian if we need to—we have had a hell of a lot of experience at it, I can tell you—to make sure that the sheep are getting an adequate ration and certainly a ration that is good enough for young sheep to grow on. We do not want their potential inhibited. You have got two choices in a drought: you either feed them or you sell them. We usually do a combination of both, so our flock numbers are back by 50 per cent since 2016 and we may yet have to go lower. My brother has got a saying, 'You either pay now or pay later', and we are going to pay a huge price for lower sheep numbers in the next few years because we just do not have the revenue.

And any shy feeders—you pick out the shy feeders in the mob pretty quickly. They are the ones that do not come to the feed trail, and they very rapidly lose weight—you go around and grab them and you take them home to a hospital paddock. In most cases if you take them out of the mob and put them in a smaller group with other animals, they will start to eat the ration and they pick up. So you always grab them.

Now, just in relation to animal welfare, transparency and the broader community, the accountability of people who run livestock, and I certainly feel this, is much greater today than it has ever been in the past because of community expectations, the increase in the population—we are pretty isolated, but the number of people on our road has just gone ‘poof’, so there is always somebody driving past and with the ubiquitous pocket phone with the built-in camera it is very easy for people to report things that they do not like the look of. And I know my local district veterinarian officer has been very busy with such reports in recent times.

Now, if I could just turn to Gippy Goat, there is something here that I thought was quite significant. I noted that the people who invaded that farm claimed that the business was not transparent. Well, my wife and I happened to visit Gippy Goat one Sunday before all this business happened, and I was highly impressed with the business. We spoke to the farm manager and told them where we were from and what we do, and we were invited to have a look around the shed where the does were kept. They were in cracking good condition. They were very well looked after. There is a public viewing gallery at the dairy for people to view what goes on. There were some animals housed in an area where people could feed them and get up close and personal. Goats are very inquisitive animals and provide great delight for people because they will take food from your hand and they will let you pat them. That business was open to the public. You could go in. There was no charge to go in. The only way they made any money out of being open to the public was with their cafe, if people chose to purchase some food or beverage there.

Talking to the farm manager, what was evident was that they had a whole-of-life animal health program and breeding program, very similar to what we have and what a heck of a lot of farms practice today. So that demonstrated to me a very high level of transparency. So what has the outcome been? Well, the front gate is locked today, the cafe is closed, the people who worked there have lost their business, they have lost their jobs. People in the cafe have lost their jobs, and there is no more access to the public. I think that is very sad for town people, urban people, who could take their children there and get direct contact with animals. That is pretty hard for urban people to get these days. I think that is going to be one of the unfortunate spin-offs from this activity—people are going to shut their gates because they fear the repercussions of being open.

In addition to that, the behaviour is at such odds to the Australian tradition of admiring people who have a go. There are very good mechanisms for people to report things they see that they do not like through the department of ag—I am not sure what their name is today, but I will always refer to them as the department of ag—or the RSPCA. All complaints are investigated by trained officers, and in a discussion with my local district veterinary officer the other day he told me that he is very busy. As a result of these investigations appropriate actions are always put in place depending on the circumstances. That can range from some advice being given, some assistance being given, right up to charges being laid. The identity of the person reporting the incident is always kept confidential. So what I am saying is that, based on what I am aware of, I think the system works very well.

In closing, I will just read from my submission:

In my view it would be fair to say that the great silent majority want Australian farmers to get on with the job of producing clean, safe, wholesome food at an affordable price as well as exporting to the rest of the world so that we can support the standard of living people enjoy in Australia.

I think that the people who produce the food you eat deserve some respect in a civilised society.

People who organise and instigate invasions and those who invade and steal from farms are not protesters. They are criminals and they should meet the full force of the law.

If this trend is allowed to continue there is a risk that it will boil over with very serious consequences.

Maintaining the peace should be the governments highest priority.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Chris, would you like to say anything before we start questions?

Mr NIXON: John has said most of it for me.

The CHAIR: Your name, please.

Mr NIXON: Chris Nixon from Orbost, East Gippsland. I am actually an unwilling participant here today. I have been heavily involved in various roles through the VFF. It does bring a bit of unwanted attention at times. I thought there was very little I could actually add to what John was going to say today, so I am here more as moral support than anything else. I have to say that, as a producer, I am concerned about the trends for these on-farm invasions. They are not helping the welfare of the animals on farm. I have clearly outlined in my submission the effects that do occur when even known people—I am talking cattle in particular—come up to them that they do not respond well to. Animals are like humans: they get along well with some and not others. So I do not expect it to be any different when strangers come in there—the adverse effect is much greater. And that is the point that needs to be fully understood. Even with my own workforce, where we all interact with the animals, the cows will say, ‘I like him but they won’t like me’ or vice versa. That does happen even in the dairy herd, it happens in the beef herd and it is just like a human population. Having strangers come on farm and invade farms—that impacts even greater, and now the animal welfare outcome is even worse than what they are trying to pretend.

Like John, I am at a loss to understand what the end game here is. I put a little cheeky sidenote online at the back of my submission from Matthew Evans in Tasmania which points out that all animal systems have their downfalls. Anyone who has been to the almond orchard out there in the Riverina or in the Mallee will know that their systems of agriculture are not risk free. There are some serious repercussions for those as well. So my submission is more about the different roles of the different animal systems that we all run and how they have impacted and how we have changed as farmers going forward—to be clear, going from a low-input, set-stocking regime in the 80s, moving to now a high-input, high-stocking regime, moving to a regenerative ag regime where the outcome that we are aiming for is the best outcome for the animals.

Like John, we are doing a whole-of-animal-life program so that we are starting before the calf is born right through to the end of the animal to try and minimise the losses and maximise the profit that farmers are in business of farming for. And let us be clear: farmers are not in here because we love farming animals, full stop; we are here to make a profit. So we do have to be aware that it is a capital system that we are in, and we should not be shy of saying it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Before we start questions, I would just like to welcome some representatives we have here from different media, so welcome to you all.

John, you said that maintaining the peace should be the government’s highest priority. Is there any other sort of policy that you would like to see the government doing—any other policies that you would like from government?

Mr BUXTON: Mr Chairman, that is a good question. I do not have an answer right at the moment. Is that a fair response?

The CHAIR: Yes, that is all right. If you want, you can provide something in writing later on, and we are happy to accept that.

Mr BUXTON: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Mr Buxton and Mr Dixon, for both of your testimonies here today. Thank you very much for appearing. If I can start with you first, Mr Buxton, you quote extensively here talking about guidelines and codes of practice and these sorts of things. I suppose, for the benefit of everybody here, you are aware of course that these are non-mandatory codes of practice, correct?

Mr BUXTON: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Yes.

Mr BUXTON: But if I can—

Mr MEDDICK: No, but they are non-mandatory, so there is no actual onus on any particular farmer or producer to actually abide by those guidelines.

Mr BUXTON: There is no legal obligation, but there is a market-based obligation. My view is that this will become more stringent over time. Every time you consign livestock for sale, you have got to fill in a vendor declaration; it is a statutory declaration. You are effectively saying, if you fill that in, 'I've got a set of records like this to back it up'.

Mr MEDDICK: So then the second question to that would be, I suppose, that if you are a proponent of what you believe are good guidelines and good codes of practice, you would accept and be happy to be a proponent for those to become mandatory so that farmers must adhere to those, that there is no voluntary way of going about it. Because clearly that would then, in your opinion—because you adhere to them on your own farm—give the public assurance that the highest standards of animal welfare are being adhered to by all producers. You would clearly support that, yes?

Mr BUXTON: Do I support compulsion? Look, I think everybody should have it. Whether or not I support it being enforced by legislation, I would need to take that on notice and consider it.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay. Other industries are compelled to maintain different standards in their industries, so surely that would be something that all industries in Australia should accept across the board?

Okay. And also there is a general perception—I wonder if you can answer this for me—or not a perception but several federal government reports, for instance, have actually come back with it. For instance, I have this one here that was commissioned by the federal government—a 2019 report titled *Australia's Shifting Mindset on Farm Animal Welfare*. It was commissioned by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, and it found that 95 per cent of respondents viewed farm animal welfare with concern and 91 per cent wanted reform to address it. Then another one from the Productivity Commission also states:

... animal welfare regulations are not meeting community expectations about the humane treatment of farm animals.

Would you think then that, as a result of that, primary producers, farm producers, have responsibility—

Mr NIXON: Can you give us the example that you are using there? You have made a general statement about it not meeting the standards. Have you got the example that they are using there to say that?

Mr MEDDICK: I am sorry?

Mr NIXON: You are saying the general perception was that they are not meeting community standards. My view of the world—

Mr MEDDICK: I have got the report here. I am happy to give you a copy where it states that.

Mr NIXON: I have not read it so—

Mr MEDDICK: And also the one from the Productivity Commission—I am happy for you to get a copy of that. I am quoting what the federal government's own Department of Agriculture believes is the case. So that is the evidence to back that up. Coming back to it, there are practices that are considered standard practice, then, within the industry, right, various industries within agriculture. Clearly according to these reports from the federal government the general public might not necessarily consider them to be welfare but they might consider them cruel. Would you also then support that? As I say, you talk about transparency as well, Mr Buxton—I thank you for that—of people being able to go and see things. Would you not also support mandatory CCTV in all farms and slaughterhouses so that the general public can see these purported good welfare outcomes and good practices, so that then they can make those decisions for themselves, because surely this would also then lead, perhaps in your opinion, to better animal welfare practices. Would that not be the case?

Mr BUXTON: Well, the way you state it, it is. There is another question about what is fair and reasonable scrutiny in a democratic society. Do you want a CCTV camera watching you in your office?

Mr MEDDICK: I have no problem with that at all. I am in public office.

The CHAIR: Sorry, we have to move on.

Mr MEDDICK: But I am not being questioned here. I am here to ask you questions.

Mr BUXTON: That is a pretty confronting question, I have to say.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can we move on, please?

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you very much, Mr Buxton and Mr Nixon, for presenting to us today and for providing submissions to us. I would just like to go to the biosecurity issue of what happens if people enter or invade an agricultural premises. How does that affect biosecurity on that premises?

Mr NIXON: The Committee is probably aware of African swine fever, which is actually impacting on the world's protein sources at the moment. We do know that it has turned up at the airports at the moment already with international passengers. It has reduced the world's protein sources by 10 per cent already. There is no known cure. There is no restocking of the infected premises after an infection. So like foot-and-mouth disease from overseas, swine fever coming through would have an absolutely devastating effect on the pork industry in Australia. These things are easily transferable. They do not know how swine fever is actually being transported from premises to premises. They have got no idea, and there is no cure. So for the pig industry in particular, I would be highly concerned about swine fever.

Sadly, in the high country, where we have a farm, we get incursions all the time from deer shooters. They think it is a God-given right that they can cut the fence and drive through whenever they feel like it, especially when your Government maps say the roads end at my farm. So it is a huge issue. If we ever got a major disease incursion, it would have an enormous impact on how people work and operate. We saw that when we had the equine flu outbreak, where we had checkpoints all around the state trying to stop horses being moved. The impacts are huge. It is not understood by the general population what those incursions really mean.

Mrs McARTHUR: How do you actually prevent the biosecurity problem?

Mr NIXON: The only thing we can do at the moment is padlock the gates and have our little signs out there. There is no real means of stopping people if they want to come in. That is the reality of life on broadacre farms.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thank you, John and Chris, for the evidence that you have given at the hearing today. Perhaps if I could direct this question to both of you: has the threat of animal activism changed the way that you operate your respective businesses? Perhaps, John, if I could hear from you first.

Mr BUXTON: Not at this stage, but it has had a fear effect on me. It has caused me to contemplate what would happen. Can I just say, I am very proud of what my brother and I do. We go without to make sure that we can feed the sheep. Our sheep are in slashing good condition at the moment. I am damn proud of them, let me tell you. We have been through one of the toughest droughts in recorded history and our sheep are in cracking good condition. That is no accident. We spent 53 per cent of our gross cash flow last financial year to feed the sheep, and our budget for the current year—this can change dramatically either way—our projected losses are a heck of a lot bigger than they were last financial year and the feed bill is looking like being 68 per cent of the gross. So we do not take this lightly.

Ms TERPSTRA: I understand, but the question was about whether you had changed things in terms of the threat of animal activism. But your earlier answer was no.

Mr BUXTON: Well, no, I think, unless somebody whose knowledge and authority I respect can show me that we can improve. You know, if one of our veterinary advisers or animal nutritionist advisers says, 'Listen, have you contemplated this because' we would consider that. We would think it through. But at the moment I reckon what we are doing is right up there.

Ms TERPSTRA: Okay, thanks, John. Chris?

Mr NIXON: Yes, we have changed in the last few years. We no longer sell five-day-old poddy calves into the market; we actually euthanase them on the farm. So that is a major change that we have made already. That came about when I was sitting on the Cattle Council doing the standing guidelines back in 2011 and realised that this was coming. So we just took it on the head and did it straightaway.

Ms TERPSTRA: But why did you make that change?

Mr NIXON: We just assumed it was going to come to us anyway. Most farmers are usually fairly proactive in welfare outcomes. We are on the borderline of the 24-hour curfew for the freighting of poddy calves so we decided, ‘Well, we will resolve this issue—we will just move to the termination of the calf at birth’.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thank you.

Ms BATH: Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation today. Mr Nixon, in your submission and just now, you referenced Matthew Evans, who I think was once a fancy Sydneyite who moved to Tasmania and runs the Fat Pig Farm. In his article that you have referenced he talks about monocultures: for example, growing 75 hectares of peas down in Tasmania and the fact that that farm down there has a licence to kill possums. It says in here 800 to 1000 possums, 500 wallabies and also deer, and I guess he is referencing in that the fact that even though there are monocultures, there are vegetarian monocultures. They also have a consequence for animals and there are deaths resulting from that monoculture. I am interested to know: what do you think in terms of information out in the public that needs to be more evident about these sorts of farming practices or, I guess, in general to educate the public about all sides of the equation?

Mr NIXON: Look, I know that the IPCC just came out with the claim that we should move to a more plant-based diet program for climate change reasons. The reality is that once people get to understand what regenerative ag is all about, the ability to capture and store carbon in a grazing enterprise far outweighs growing trees, and that is now only just coming out. It is not well-known. You have got practitioners in the industry now like Dick Richardson, Colin Seis, Charlie Massy and a few who are out there spreading the message on how we can improve grazing practices to capture more carbon and improve our productivity. So monoculture, you have only got to go and see the almond farmers up in Mildura to understand that they are not a happy place. There is no broad biodiversity program going through there. Between environmental flows and the amount of water going to the almond farmers, they are actually eroding the Barmah Choke. Every farming production system has unintended consequences, and monocultural farms—I can grow all the soybeans I like, and most of them are GM, and people are quite happy to have them, but the reality is when you are growing a plant-based crop you do not want competition to get the maximum productivity out of it.

Ms BATH: Mr Buxton, you referenced Gippy Goat Farm—and, like you, I have been there a number of times before it was closed and after it was closed, the actual cafe—and you also referenced on-farm activism. What would you like to see changed—in a broad spectrum, not fine grain—in relation to the repercussions for people being convicted of on-farm trespass?

Mr BUXTON: Well the court needs to bear in mind the need to maintain the peace and the civic glue that holds the community together and maintains that peaceful, harmonious society. If the justice system sends a message that says, you know, trespass and traumatising people is acceptable, I do not see how that fits with maintaining the peace.

Mr QUILTY: I just noticed that this is the country end of the table, with people with a farming background here, and over that part of the table it is a city background, and you might—

Mr BARTON: I beg to differ.

Mr MEDDICK: Completely incorrect, Mr Quilty, sorry.

Ms BATH: Controversy, Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: You can see that with their suggestion that you could put CCTV cameras over a few thousand hectares of farmland to see what is going on. I guess I would like to return to the idea that you are saying if farmers, country people, feel that they are not getting protected by the law, that they would take things into their own hands—

Mr BUXTON: I do not want that to happen.

Mr QUILTY: But if the courts and the police will not protect farmers and farming enterprises, can you expand on what you think could happen?

Mr BUXTON: Well, what does history and experience in other places in the world tell us, Mr Quilty? You are a Member of the legislative body. The legislative body is a leadership organisation in the community. What kind of message do you want to send? Do you want to maintain a peaceful, harmonious society?

Mr QUILTY: Yes.

Mr BUXTON: Is that important?

Mr QUILTY: I think so.

Mr GEPP: A couple of questions from the ‘not city slicker’ as described by my friend to my left.

Mr BUXTON: I am sorry. I have always welcomed people onto the farm who have a genuine interest and want to have a look and see what we do. I have not done it in recent times. I was part of the Open Farm Day program. I always open the farm for farm day. Most people are very proud of what they do, and they are prepared to show people. Sorry, go ahead.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, gentlemen, for your presentation today. A couple of questions: Mr Buxton, earlier you took us through your practices on your farm and your adherence to the animal welfare standards and guidelines. If a farmer did not follow those standards and guidelines, what would be the practical reality for that individual in terms of their enterprise?

Mr BUXTON: Well, there are two possibilities. He has got a high morbidity/mortality rate, there are dead animals in the paddock and somebody goes past—I can think of a case not far from us where this has actually happened—somebody whips out the pocket phone and goes click and sends it off to the district veterinary officer. That person gets a visit. I can think of a couple of cases where it has happened in my area quite recently. That farmer loses the value of that animal—that hurts—and he has got to live with the grief, and trust me it is real grief, if they are in poor health and they are not thriving. Look, there are things out of left field that will bring in a health issue that is really hard to deal with. In extremely wet winters we can get a listeriosis problem in the sheep. The common name for it is circling disease—it is a bacteria—and all of a sudden you will find some sheep just with their heads in the air going around and around in circles, and they are dead in 24 hours. There is precious little you can do except take them to the dead hole—shoot them. It is a zoonotic disease, so you have got to be a bit careful with it. If you get it yourself, woo hoo! So there are left-field things. So, yes, there are consequences. Have I answered your question adequately?

Mr GEPP: Yes, you have. Just to pick you up and expand a bit on one of the points that you made, there are obviously going to be examples in the industry where people are not following proper practices, for whatever reasons.

Mr NIXON: Correct, yes.

Mr GEPP: What advice would you give the Committee and subsequently the Parliament on how we can approach that particular aspect? We know that the standards and guidelines are not mandatory, but how can we address with those farmers the issues. I do not know what percentage of farmers would not practise similar sorts of standards as you do, but I imagine those that are not following those standards and guidelines are the ones that we perhaps need to be conversing with to bring them up to a standard that is appropriate.

Mr BUXTON: I am very happy to answer that question. I think it is a very good question, Mark. That department, whatever it calls itself today, could play a great role in education and making people aware of what they need to do.

Mr NIXON: The question from Mr Meddick way earlier was: what are the goals on achieving the animal welfare outcome that people desire? The Coles grass-fed program is all based around the animal welfare program. I am in with Bega Cheese. Woolworths has got a similar one. Aldi has got a similar one—

Mr BUXTON: JBS.

Mr NIXON: JBS has got a similar one.

Mr BUXTON: Greenham.

Mr NIXON: Greenham. The big meat companies have all got their own pasture-fed or their own welfare programs. If you want to supply their programs, and that is where the best dollars in the marketplace are, you have to be a part of them. I have always been fond of the market-based solution, and that is a very clear one.

Mr BUXTON: Yes. Look, that is a strong and growing trend. It really is, and—

Mr NIXON: The issue for us is that if you want to be Coles and Woolworths, you have got to have two different programs and the differences between the two are negligible. Which is—

Mr GEPP: I am from northern Victoria and I understand, talking to—

Mr BUXTON: Sorry, can you say—

Mr GEPP: My electorate is northern Victoria, and I understand, talking to fruit producers in particular, where they have got different arrangements with two big providers about those two standards and the complexity that they—

Mr NIXON: Yes.

Mr BUXTON: Yes. Look, we tried to have an industry standard—Flockcare and Cattlecare—but it has been run over with companies developing their own individual ones. There is a competition issue around that, because a small two-man outfit—there is a limit to how much admin you can do. And one universal program with maybe a couple of add-ons for JBS and Greenham—you know, most farmers do not want to be locked into one consumer. Having said that, there is a massive shift in culture in the meat industry. I started trading livestock direct over the hooks to meat processors in the early 80s when, if you were not on the kill floor to see your cattle killed—and it took a bit of courage to do that, let me tell you—you got taken down on hot standard carcass weight and the Aus-Meat standard trim every time. But I learned pretty quickly that if you were brave enough to front up, you won a hell of a lot of respect. And if you showed that you were interested, those meat processors—I have got some meat processors today who are lifelong friends. The culture in that industry has changed enormously, and today a business like Greenham wants you to have their Never Ever program and they say to you, ‘We’ll pay you within 36 hours of processing your stock, and you are an integral part of our business because you supply us’. They need suppliers who can meet their requirements to underpin their brand; that is the commercial reality. And that is a growing trend. Now, they are going to use that as a competitive edge to get the best producers.

Mr BARTON: I have a question slash statement. I did own a farm up in northern Victoria. I was up around the Stanhope area—dairy farms—and I had it for many years. I also understand that what you are saying is just good business practice, having this set of standards put through. But I also know that when things are tough people cut corners. It is really about should there be a set of standards that have to be met? Because we do know not everybody is like you—some are not always meeting the standards.

Mr BUXTON: Yes. That is a similar question to Mr Meddick’s before, and I have just been thinking about his question about compulsory CCTV cameras. I have to say to you that I would see that as an incursion by the deep state. I would deeply resent it. But the idea of somebody coming to audit my program every year does not faze me in the slightest and I would actually welcome it. Does that help?

Mr BARTON: Yes. Thank you very much. I will just say about CCTV cameras—I am from the taxi industry—that they are our office. We have cameras in our office. So, yes.

Mr BUXTON: Sir, I would have to say I deeply resent that. I would see that as an intrusion by the deep state.

Mr BARTON: It is a safety measure.

Mr BUXTON: It is a trust issue, you know? Do we trust people to do the right thing or not? And there are consequences for people who do not.

Mr MEDDICK: I thank you for your honesty, Mr Buxton and Mr Nixon. I stress I am not trying to put anyone on trial here, right? I am trying to elicit responses so the broader community can have a greater discussion about this, because that is what this Inquiry is all about. It is about a number of things. It is not just about farm invasion, it is about trying to look at ways that we can improve animal welfare standards.

And that was why my questioning was towards you—as people who are involved in the industry, as experts on the ground—about, for instance, mandatory codes of conduct and principles. Because clearly you believe that you have or are maintaining—and you have got your book there, everything, you have produced it—a certain level that you believe is the best. And so you have kind of half-answered Mr Gepp in that respect. I would appreciate it if you could say, look, would you like to see the industry—I have another question in a moment, a very, very short one. Would you absolutely, categorically say that there should be mandatory codes of conduct or codes of practice across the industry? I bear in mind your hesitance for CCTV. Let us just push that one aside for the moment.

The CHAIR: We are running out of time.

Mr MEDDICK: But that one—mandatory?

Mr BUXTON: Yes. I still have a philosophical problem with mandatory. There is a different culture in the bush. We are much, much more independent people, and we do not like somebody else—Big Brother—telling us how to do things. So philosophically I have a problem with that, but yes, I do have a belief that everybody should have one of these and they should be audited annually. But I am not sure how you go about getting it there. Market forces are going to drive it. There will be a consequence for people who cannot meet the standard. That is growing all the time. I can get access to kill chain like that, because I, you know—

Mr MEDDICK: Yes. The relationships that you built up over the years.

Mr BUXTON: Because I have built up those relationships.

Mr MEDDICK: I understand that.

Mr BUXTON: But other people cannot.

Mrs McARTHUR: I would just like to go to a couple of aspects in your submissions about your farm being your home. How is that impacted if there are people invading your home? Secondly, I would like you to comment on the aspect of cruelty to animals when people invade your farm and, as they did with Gippy Goat, steal animals and then have them ending up in somebody's bed, and the fact that several hundred chooks were lost due to that invasion. So what sort of message does that send about cruelty to animals with farm invasion? So about your home and the cruelty to animals.

Mr BUXTON: Good question.

Mr NIXON: Yes, it is a difficult one. Our home is also our workplace, so if we get knocked on the door by WorkSafe because our office is in our home, it is our workplace and they have got the right to go right through our home and inspect our home. So it is not the first time; intrusion like that can happen. In broadacre farming it is a little bit harder to quantify where that home invasion is, because they will be more at the stockyard there.

Mr BUXTON: I still see all of our farm as our space, and I am happy to take you on and show you around, but if you intrude on it I feel threatened.

Mr NIXON: Yes. So the basic premise is that if you want to set up camp on my house, you would get upset if I set that up on someone's lawn in the middle of the city, so there seem to be two different standards at play. People do not like setting up in people's businesses in the town. Why should our farm be separate to how people view how their business is being operated in town?

Mrs McARTHUR: And the cruelty aspect to animals that occurs in farm invasions?

Mr BUXTON: Yes. Well, there is a classic case here reported in the *Weekly Times*, which you have referred to—24 July—and I raised the question in my submission about that. Third paragraph:

... significant property damage and the “horrifying” deaths of about 300 chickens from smothering.

Were the people responsible for that charged with cruelty to animals? Because that is a clear case of cruelty to livestock. It really is.

Mr NIXON: But even on broadacre country, with the cattle background I have got, they will not respond. They will not get production and growth going forward, because they have been yarding upset cattle for a day to do some health checks. That will knock their growth back for three days. This is proven by MLA studies. So every time you have got strangers running around the place and cattle are being chased for whatever reason, that has an adverse impact that is hard to quantify in monetary terms but certainly has an impact on the animals, because they do not like being chased. They become nervous and fidgety, and—

Mrs McARTHUR: So in fact the animal activists are perpetrating cruelty to animals?

Mr BUXTON: Yes.

Mr NIXON: In their own right, yes, they are.

Mr BUXTON: Yes, and what Chris has just referred to has led to—and I know he practises it—comprehensive weaning programs for calves to educate them to be handled so that it is not a scary experience for them next time they go through the yards.

The CHAIR: All done? On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and contribution, both of you, and in a few weeks time you will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. Thank you very much.

Mr NIXON: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.