

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Warrnambool—Tuesday, 17 September 2019

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WITNESS

Ms Lisa Dwyer.

The CHAIR: Good morning and welcome. The Committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into the Impacts of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture, and the evidence is being recorded. Welcome to the public hearing of 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

I would just like to remind people in the gallery, please, if you have got your phone, turn it to silent, and no photos except the media if we have representatives from the media here.

Before you start, can you state your name for the Hansard record.

Ms DWYER: My name is Lisa Dwyer.

The CHAIR: Welcome. Go ahead, and allow us some time to ask you some questions.

Ms DWYER: Certainly. I am appearing today in an individual capacity, but in the interests of disclosure I should also inform the Committee that I am a dairy farmer. I am also a Non-Executive Director of the Australian Livestock Export Corporation, I am a Non-Executive Director of Murray Goulburn Co-operative Co and also Chairman of the Victorian Government's regional partnership for the Great South Coast region.

Like most people with an association in agriculture, I have taken an active interest in the examination of the matters relevant to this Inquiry, and I certainly appreciate having been given the opportunity to present to you this morning. And it is particularly important given my primary occupation as a dairy farmer but also due to the responsibilities that I hold to the companies that I just mentioned a short time ago and also due to the role that I hold with the regional partnership for the region as a whole.

With regard to the terms of reference, I would like to address point b in particular by proposing for the Committee's consideration an impact of animal activist activity that appears to have been largely underreported, and that is the weaponising of the ostensible values of animal rights activists to create the circumstance where many involved in livestock agriculture no longer feel that they can speak up for the benefits that livestock farming provides for fear of reprisal. If these musings of mine have any merit at all, then the flow-on effects have a very real negative consequence economically, socially and perhaps, ironically, for the continuous improvement of livestock animal welfare.

In terms of providing the Committee with a broader context, the Great South Coast region is characterised by a high concentration of agricultural activity compared to Victoria as a whole, with agriculture being the key export for the region. It comprises 29 per cent of our gross regional product, and from a dairy-specific perspective a recent study demonstrated a multiplier effect totalling \$1.364 billion that is reinjected into this community and that also supports 8600 jobs either on farm or in the processing sector. The dairy sector in the south-west is now the nation's largest, and it is therefore strategically important to Victoria's economy.

If I could perhaps provide some illustration, and using the livestock export sector as an example, perhaps surprisingly livestock export is an important component within this region for two reasons: one as a much-needed income diversification source for dairy farmers; and secondly, as a key provider of economic and social wellbeing in the Glenelg shire region through the port of Portland. According to the ABS social and economic indices for areas measure, out of the 79 local government areas across Victoria, Glenelg is the eighth most disadvantaged, and it is in that context that the importance of live animal exports out of Portland can be highlighted. As an example, for the 18 months to June this year a total of 107 194 head of dairy cattle were exported by sea from all ports in Victoria. Of that number, nearly 100 000 head were exported out of Portland and had a value of some \$200 million. It is also worth noting that between 50 and 250 individual farming enterprises will have contributed animals to a single average consignment of around 3000 head. So that is a lot of farming families that extend way beyond just the Glenelg region to all dairy regions across Victoria.

One of the things that I have noticed is that every discussion on this topic, and mine is no exception, seems to reference the economic imperatives of agriculture. I am the last person to say that we should underestimate that. But I think that the importance of what we as farmers and others involved in livestock production provide extends far beyond just the economic imperatives because it also encompasses social wellbeing and the wellbeing of our nation. By way of example, from a social wellbeing perspective it is interesting to note that the Great South Coast region has high numbers of registered mental health clients per 1000 of the population. This is close to or greater than double the Victorian average across all local government areas. Secondly, from a historical perspective, it is also worth noting that the co-evolution of humans and animals extends beyond 10 000 years, and as a result the co-dependencies between animals and humans have shaped cultures across the world and also help us to understand who we are.

With those two points in mind, and given the aforementioned high concentration of agriculture in this region in particular, any unjustified criticism by activists can have deep and lasting negative impacts on two things that no human should ever have to compromise—that is, their sense of who they are and their sense of self-worth. So rather than be cowed into silence by those who at best have only a cursory understanding of agriculture or agricultural communities, we should instead be proud of our roles in producing high-quality food and fibre for millions of people in a manner that is both sustainable and ethical, and we should be equally proud of the communities that we are a part of and the contribution that we make to our state and our nation.

The final point that I would like to raise is that expanding the value of the role that agriculture plays beyond economics and social wellbeing is the often overlooked value that Victorian agricultural production plays in the national wellbeing. Victoria contributes 27 per cent of Australia's total food and fibre by export value and as a result is well positioned to play a role in supporting international diplomacy efforts via the food security priorities of other nations that are not only in our domestic interests but also in the interests of the people of those countries with which we trade. In the live export trade, for example, I have seen firsthand the direct economic, social and diplomatic benefits for a number of countries, including our most populous and strategic neighbour to the north, Indonesia, where Australia has directly influenced an increase in stunning rates from 15 per cent to 85 per cent, and in one of the most politically sensitive geographies in the world, being the Middle East, where Australia's direct influence has seen a shift from individuals taking an animal home to slaughter in the absence of any animal welfare considerations at all to animals now being processed in closed-loop, state-of-the-art markets and abattoirs that effectively remove the potential for the customary practices of old. We are an open-trade island nation and heavily reliant on our ability to be able to engage with foreign countries not only from an economic perspective but for social stability and security reasons as well. Our reputation as a high-quality, reliable producer of food and fibre is something that we should never take for granted.

In summary, I implore the Committee when considering their recommendations not only to take account of the impacts such recommendations will have on upholding the rule of law and the obvious economic imperatives but to consider also the indirect yet very real risks to social wellbeing and national wellbeing when animal welfare's greatest proponents are silenced.

The CHAIR: Lisa, thank you very much. On your final point, do you think there are any policies you would like to see the Government implement or the Committee come up with?

Ms DWYER: I think it is a mistake to rely on government to resolve all of our problems. I think that it really needs to be a partnership that includes government of course, but it is also reliant on the agricultural sector and the agricultural bodies to work together to try and address some of these wicked problems, if you like.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Lisa, for a fabulous presentation and a very comprehensive report on how agriculture benefits Australia and particularly this region. I want to go to the point you are making about our international reputation. How does our international reputation get affected by reports of cruelty to farm animals when we are a major exporter of animal produce to the rest of the world?

Ms DWYER: It is a really good point. In fact I was just reading an article yesterday on global livestock exports, and it was the top 10, of which Australia is one, and the reference that was made, the differential that was pointed to for Australia was the animal welfare standards that we have in place here. Of course we do have a very strong and justified reputation as being a quality producer and a reliable producer, and anything that can

erode that or create doubt in our customers' minds can only be detrimental to our overall efforts in producing food and fibre.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Ms Dwyer, for your appearance here today. Thanks very much. Your speciality and what you have been speaking around is live export. I just have a couple of very quick questions. Just relating to that last one there, do you believe then that the inherent cruelty that has been shown onboard live export ships and what happens in processing plants overseas—it has been shown a massive amount of times to the general public, and there is no doubt that it has affected Australia's overseas reputation. ESCAS has been shown to have failed in this instance many times. Do you believe, first of all, that all of these incidents of animal cruelty should be suppressed then, that the general public does not have the right to know when they are occurring or to see them be publicised because you believe it is affecting our reputation? That in effect then amounts to lack of transparency for the general public. Do you accept then also that many studies over the years have shown that the majority of Australians, in fact well in excess of 80 per cent over the years in every single survey that has been conducted, do not believe that we should be continuing to engage in the live export trade regardless of whatever perceived economic impacts there are for the Australian economy?

Ms DWYER: Thank you for your question. Firstly, I would dispute the fact that animal cruelty is inherent within live export. Secondly, I most certainly do not support for one second the suppression of any of the adverse outcomes that might occur in live export or any other sector, whether it be livestock-related or not. I think that that has been one of the failings of the sector over the course of many years in that they have not been as transparent as they should have been.

I also do not believe that—sorry, I am not disputing, but I do not know the exact percentage of Australian citizens that do not support live export. What I would challenge is that the reason that perhaps they formed those opinions is because they are not as informed as perhaps they should be. I think that that goes to a large point about why this Inquiry is being held, and the point that I was making earlier in that there are people who do benefit from the live trade, from livestock export. The average Australian that benefits from the food and fibre that we produce in this country does not have the level of awareness or understanding that they might have about other matters and they are, in my opinion, unduly influenced by a minority who have a very extreme and narrow view.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much for your presentation, Lisa, today. You mentioned at the beginning of your presentation the concerns that you have around activism maybe as a dairy farmer and in that capacity the under-reporting of the influence of the effect of activism on the community or on the farming community in a broad sense. Would you like to tease that out a little bit more?

Ms DWYER: Unfortunately this phenomenon is not unique just to the agricultural sector. I think that it is really disappointing for me to observe my fellow farmers or colleagues that are involved in a number of different agricultural pursuits who no longer feel that they can speak up in support of what they do for fear of reprisal. I think that not only is this region and this state at a detriment as a result but the whole nation is. We really should not underestimate the value of not only the economic benefit that what we do provides because, as I tried to articulate earlier, it goes far beyond just economics. It goes to who we are. It goes to the social wellbeing of rural and regional Australia and when I see in-market overseas the impact that it has on people's lives—we should be singing this stuff from the rooftops. We should not be cowering and afraid to say that, 'I'm involved in live export' or, 'I am a dairy farmer'. It is such a shame to see this happening before my very eyes. That is why I am here today, to try and make the Committee aware that these are very real and very serious ramifications.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Lisa. As the daughter of a dairy farmer, I concur entirely with your sentiments. You mentioned our clean and green reputation, and I think it is very important that the standards that we hold in terms of the quality of our livestock et cetera are put on the table. In terms of the threat with respect to the biosecurity of on-farm invasion and activism, would you like to make some comments in relation to that?

Ms DWYER: I do not think that there is anything I can add for the Committee's benefit that has not already been raised previously, other than to say that in light of what we are seeing occurring in Asian countries with African swine fever the risk to agriculture in this country is very real, and it can be nothing short of catastrophic if an incursion such as that or foot-and-mouth disease was to occur. I think that it is very easy for this nation to

become very complacent about those kinds of matters, but we should never forget just how catastrophic such an incursion would be.

Mr BARTON: My colleagues have asked the very questions I was going to ask. I just want to tease out a little bit more about the community and social harm, where people are afraid to speak out. I certainly lived in the middle of a dairy area surrounded by dairy farms, and it is very concerning that people are sort of trying to hold these things in. People are afraid. We do not want anyone to be afraid.

Ms DWYER: No, we do not. That is why I pulled out that statistic about the mental health rates in this particular region being anything up to double the average of Victorian LGAs. So for this region in particular that is not a throwaway line.

Mr BARTON: That is real.

Ms DWYER: That is a very real threat. So, yes, the point that you raise is extremely important.

Mr GEPP: Just a quick one from me. Lisa, thanks for being here today. You focused particularly on part B of the terms of reference. I wonder if you might, following on from Ms Bath's question, take us through a little bit some of the biosecurity measures that you undertake on your farm to protect your livestock, just to give us a sense of the things that you do on a daily basis.

Ms DWYER: Sure. We have a biosecurity plan, just like we have an animal health and welfare philosophy, actually, on our farm. We are accredited through the Livestock Production Assurance program. Through our milk processor we have a quality standard that we have to meet. So all of that is very important to us but is relatively straightforward. Perhaps an example might be a better way to demonstrate how we run. Last year we received a B-double load of cereal hay from northern Victoria, and I just happened to be heading home from the dairy when the truck pulled in. I was walking past and looking at this and I was thinking, 'I don't like the look of some of the weed in that consignment'. Long story short, that consignment was sent back out the gate. I do not know where it went, but we did not accept it because of the potential for the introduction of weed onto our property. So it is all very well to tick a box and say, 'Yes, we comply with biosecurity requirements'; it is quite another one to actually take a very difficult decision and one that did not paint us in the greatest possible light as a client. But nonetheless the importance for our area—not just our farm but our area—in terms of introducing a weed was well worth that pain.

Mrs McARTHUR: Lisa, we have had presentations in previous hearings from animal activists who actually want the entire animal production industry closed down in this state, and therefore the nation and probably other places. What would be the impact to this area alone if there was no ability for any farmer to produce product from animals?

Ms DWYER: I would hate to even contemplate it. It would present an enormous problem for government. Because this region is now the nation's largest dairy sector, because of the peaks and troughs that every sector goes through but particularly agriculture, when dairy is faced with challenges, then the entire region feels it. You know, you can walk into any shop in this town here and they will tell you that their success or failure relies on the dairy community. So that is just one example. I also think, though, that it really goes to the heart of who we are as people. It is no mistake that 10 000 years of coevolution and now co-dependency between humans and animals is critically important in terms of who we are, how we treat one another, how we interact with animals and how we protect our animals. I just think that in that kind of situation the impact would be profound, and it is not just from an economic perspective that it would be so.

Mr MEDDICK: I just want to relate to that—what you talked about biosecurity before. So I take it, and you are saying that you have some of the highest levels on your farm, and indeed I have heard through the course of this Inquiry many farmers state that they have high levels of biosecurity. Does this mean that on your farm, for instance, when you are moving, say, from one place to another that you are wearing a hazmat suit, you are wearing shoe coverings and that you have biochemical sprays that you use et cetera? And I also refer specifically—you mentioned this earlier—to the feed that you rejected coming onto your farm. So before that truck entered the farm, was it subject to a biochemical wash, and before it left was that the same thing, given

that the World Health Organization mentions that the highest biosecurity risk in animal agriculture is not farm invasion; it is actually travelling between farms and actually on-farm security itself in that regard?

Ms DWYER: So thank you for the question. I think that the difference, though, is that they are known risks and can be addressed accordingly. So where we might have a truck coming onto the farm or we might have a discussion group that are coming onto the farm, we can take the appropriate measures to reduce or mitigate some of those risks. With invasions, we do not have that opportunity. They just turn up. In terms of your comment regarding do we get around in hazmat suits and shoe coverings, I mean, look, we need to be sensible about this, and that is certainly not the case. But we do undertake a range of measures on a daily basis that are reasonable—even in a court of law, it is all about what is reasonable—and that is what we consider to be reasonable on a functioning and well-operating dairy farm such as ours.

Mr MEDDICK: Despite the fact that the footage that I have seen of people—and let me say from the outset I do not condone farm invasion, okay. What I am saying, though, is in the footage I have seen and that has been widely publicised of activists who have partaken in this, they are actually wearing biosuits, they are actually wearing shoe coverings and they are conducting themselves with a biowash before they enter any farm environment. So would you say if they are going to partake in an illegal activity of this type, that is a fair and reasonable thing to do that would help protect your biosecurity?

Ms DWYER: Well, I think the first point here is that it is illegal—and you have just acknowledged that—and I am also pleased to hear that you do not condone illegal invasions. So whether they have got biosuits on or they have used some handwash is completely irrelevant. The practice is illegal. I know the images—

Mr MEDDICK: But we were addressing biosecurity, so it is relevant to the subject.

Ms DWYER: I know the images to which you are referring, and whilst there was a good percentage of people who did have the appropriate cover, there were a lot that certainly did not.

Mr GEPP: I just wonder whether your farm has been the subject of an invasion—I do not like this language because I think it starts to be very emotive, but put that aside for a second—if it has happened to you or to somebody that you know. In terms of the standards that you have adopted for your farm, would you say that they are standard operating procedure across the industry, or are there things that we can actually put in place throughout the industry that can lift some of those standards? I guess that question is: is there a particular farm that has been targeted for a particular reason, or is it random?

Ms DWYER: I do not know the answer to that question. But in relation to those practices, because of the geographic location of our farm—we are in a very highly visible area—when there was a warning put out that this activity was occurring in this region we did take steps to inform our staff to help them to understand how to manage such an incident. Of course it was very worrying; there is no question about that. However, one thing that the Committee might be interested in is that my husband and I had a little debate. I said, ‘If they turn up here, why don’t we let them on? Why don’t we show them our calf sheds? Why don’t we take them to the dairy? Why don’t we show them the herd?’—because we have got nothing to hide. His view was that these people are extremists. You could have the very best practices, and I would like to think that we do on our farm for our calf-rearing, for our cows and for every animal that is on our farm. It is written into our employment contracts. It is our whole philosophy. But he said ‘There will be no reasoning with them. They will find something that they are unhappy with’. I think that that is a weakness on their front, in that they seem closed to wanting to understand the other side of the argument. I want to understand their side of the argument, but I am not sure that that is reciprocated, and we are all worse off as a result.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much, Lisa. I would just like to go back and discuss something that was raised just previously in relation to hazgear that activists are apparently wearing. We have heard in this Committee from the Gippy Goat—and indeed we saw some footage from Gippy Goat, and I am sure you have heard of that issue—

Ms DWYER: Yes.

Ms BATH: That is down in Yarragon in my electorate, where they actually—and we saw footage—did not wear hazgear; they actually wore black clothes, some with hoods and a whole differential of clothing. We have

also heard in this Committee where there was a chicken meat farmer that had 70 activists come in the back of lorries, the back of trucks, and go into the sheds. They did not wear hazgear and covered-in footwear et cetera. We have also heard that at the Pakenham livestock exchange there was a similar thing where they did not wear neck-to-knee cover. What are some of the diseases that could have been brought on? I know they are not your farms, but what are some of the diseases that could have been brought onto those locations, and what could have been brought onto your farm if it were to have happened to you? What are some of the things you are most worried about?

Ms DWYER: I guess the first thing that I am thinking of is some of the bacterial diseases that calves are particularly susceptible to. That would be one of the first things that I would consider. I think, though, that we also should not underestimate the ability to bring various seeds onto a new farm as well. But, look, unfortunately I am not a veterinary scientist, so in terms of the specific diseases, I am just struggling to think of what they might be off the top of my head, but the one, as I said, that would strike terror into my heart would be the potential for bacteria to come into the calf-rearing area.

The CHAIR: Lisa, I know we are running out of time, but in your last comment you talked about debate between you and your husband, so I take it you support that better education would help everyone. Is that what you are trying to tell us?

Ms DWYER: Look, you hear that bandied about all of the time. Again, I sometimes think it is a bit of a throwaway line, but the nub of the issue is that, yes, I agree that education resolves many of life's problems, and agriculture is certainly one of them. But I guess it is the how: how do we increase the level of understanding between those of us who are actively involved in agriculture and those that are not, particularly if there is a reticence on either part to understand the other's perspective. I wish I had the answer, Chair. Unfortunately I do not.

Mrs McARTHUR: I think your husband was right, Lisa.

Ms DWYER: Come on, Mrs McArthur, that is not the case at all!

The CHAIR: Lisa, on behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and contribution. In a few weeks you will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.