

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Wangaratta—Tuesday, 8 October 2019

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WITNESS

Mr Timothy Kingma.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Before you start can you state your name for the Hansard record, and allow us some time to ask you questions. Welcome.

Mr KINGMA: Thank you. My name is Tim Kingma. I am a family pig farmer in north-central Victoria. I am also the VFF pig group president, so there are a couple of different hats there. But I do welcome the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Ag.

I am a proud and passionate pig producer. I am involved in my industry as a leader, and I am an active community member based in north-central Victoria. It is important that I am here today as the VFF pig group president. I have to convey what our industry wants—and that is, to have a safe environment for our families, our staff and our animals. The health and welfare of my pigs is one of the main concerns for me and my staff. There is a direct correlation between strong animal welfare standards and increased farm productivity. As an industry my opinion is that we are world leaders when it comes to our standards and regulations, whether that is animal welfare, our quality assurance programs, transporting our stock and educating our staff, just to name a few.

The threat that animal activists pose to the biosecurity of my farm is immense. We take biosecurity extremely seriously. For example, when I rock up to work in the morning, our shower block is on the outside of our farm. We designate that dirty. I walk in, I strip all my outside clothes off, go into a locker and walk into a two-door shower. I walk into the shower, then I walk out, and I wear farm clothes and boots that never leave the site and are in the designated clean area.

Visitors have to follow the same procedure. They have also got to declare when they were last on a farm or in contact with pigs. With the ever-increasing threat of African swine fever, if staff travel overseas, they require even longer downtime before they are allowed back on farm. So currently I have one of my staff members in Indonesia. He is having his three weeks holiday, and then I will pay him a week of pay just to stay away, because I do not want the risk coming on my farm. For our staff we have biosecurity training events regularly. Since 2005 not a single pig has been brought onto my farm. This is to maintain our high health status.

Animal activists illegally trespassing have no idea about my farm biosecurity, and the risk they pose to the welfare of my animals is immense. We are also a family farm, and the safety of my family, my staff and my staff's families are always a great concern, especially when animal activists invade and harass farmers. As a lawful business I have the right to farm in peace without the threat of harassment, theft of animals or placing the welfare of my animals in jeopardy.

One local producer in my area had activists come onto his farm. The activists let pigs out of the pens but also out of the sheds, all in the name of animal welfare. The negative welfare outcomes that these animal activists did were numerous. The pigs outside broke water lines, which meant that the rest of the farm had no water. Pigs in the sun got sunburnt. By the time the farm owner and his staff got the pigs back in the pens—they were obviously in different pens, different ages, different sizes, and there is a hierarchy in a group of pigs—the fighting began.

The emotional and mental strain on the family and the staff dealing with this mess that was left behind is unimaginable, and when I talk about emotional and mental strain, the weekend after the Aussie maps was released I had another local producer ring me in tears. He was talking to me about ending his life. He could not understand that even though he was a legally operating business, having his business and his home address advertised to activists to go and terrorise him pushed him to the edge. Fortunately, through talking with him, having his close mates spend time with him and getting him professional help, he is still a pig producer.

Even presenting today is mentally straining for me. I am concerned that my family's farm will be the next target. What legal businesses should have to be in continuing contact with local police because they fear animal activists will cause harm to their pigs or their business illegally? Living with this mental anguish is the unseen impact that animal activists have when they continually terrorise farmers. Our legal system is broken, and I call on the Parliament to help fix a system that does nothing to punish or deter our farms and our homes from being invaded by animal activists. I call for penalties of at least \$1000 on the spot and at least a \$220 000 fine for individuals and a \$400 000 fine for organisations. What is happening to farmers would not be acceptable in our local hospital, the school that my kids are at today or even this building. Would any of you accept this happening in your own home? I am a legally operating pig producer, and I just want the ability to grow food and contribute to the economy. Illegal trespass of animal activists is illegal, and the system needs to support farmers and increase penalties for trespass.

The CHAIR: Thank you. To the public, please, everyone in the gallery, can we please control ourselves. We will go through to questions. I know you said that animal activism is illegal, and you spoke about penalties and the system needing to support the farmers, but what other policies would you like to see from the Government apart from penalties? Are there any other policies you are thinking of?

Mr KINGMA: Not policies as such. I just think I am legally operating my business, and I just cannot imagine that the other legally operating businesses would have to go through this. I feel like we are being targeted as the agricultural sector. We hear talk about the cameras, as was asked earlier. Are we talking about every business owner in Australia getting a camera? I cannot see how we can make rules for one sector and not the other. Our industry is one of the most highly regulated industries, so why should there be certain rules for us and not others? I just—

The CHAIR: So you believe more education will help solve the problem?

Mr KINGMA: No. I think there is a big difference between animal welfare and animal activism. Animal welfare is around us humanely treating animals, but at the end of the day it is for consumption. I love a mixed grill on my barbecue—sorry, that is my personal choice. The thing with animal activists is they do not want farmers; they do not want us to farm animals. So we cannot compare the two.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you so much for your very enlightening presentation today, and I appreciate how difficult these things are. We are very grateful for you coming here today and putting yourself forward; it is not easy. There seems to be an issue in the general community with the area that is a farm, because I know that you would consider your farm and your business your home and your business. And you are quite right: if somebody was to walk in here, that would be breaking and entering, but if they walk onto your place, it seems to be trespassing for a start. Would it be better if a farm boundary was declared the same as any other private property? Because that seems to be an issue, whether it should be trespass or breaking and entering. And can you just explain how it affects farmers, the threat of people coming onto your property, which is also your home?

Mr KINGMA: Yes. So in terms of a boundary, I cannot see an issue with that. It is not something I have thought about, so I would have to take it on notice, but it makes sense to be fairer to me. In terms of the threat, the footage that I have seen, if someone was to come into any business wearing a balaclava, you cannot say that is not intimidation. That is what they do; they are in your face, and it is on your property. That is just the mental and emotional strain on the staff and my family. I have got three young kids all at the farm. I have got another farmhouse that has two kids and one on the way living there. It is all our staff's family. And also, they just do not understand. I know I have seen somewhere that they throw on a white jumpsuit thinking they are all of a sudden biosecure. We have actually changed our policies. With my staff now we have even talked about—we do not even bring ham products onto the farm, just because of the threat to biosecurity for our pigs. Unless you go through that process with the owner or the farm manager, if you just walk on, the risk you pose is just immense.

Mrs McARTHUR: What would happen to the industry in Australia if we did get swine fever here?

Mr KINGMA: If African swine fever came onto my farm, every pig would be destroyed. I actually had the ABC last week for 2 hours on farm, so I have got nothing to hide as a farmer. It is often said that farmers are

hiding behind biosecurity. I allowed them to come on. They took footage, and it was on the news—I want to say Friday night; I cannot fully recall—and my pigs were there for everyone to see. As I said to them at the time, if it came to our farm, they would all be destroyed and that would be heartbreaking for me, my staff, my family and our community. Our communities are doing it tough in rural Australia at the moment.

Mr QUILTY: You talked about a \$1000 on-the-spot fine. How would that work?

Mr KINGMA: I guess no different to when a policeman pulls me over and gives me an on-the-spot if I was to do something wrong. And \$1000, in my opinion, is not even enough. I know when I go to a football match it is \$10 000 if I trespass on the MCG, so I still think we have got a long way to go.

Mr QUILTY: You mentioned there had been a farm invasion. Did the police respond rapidly, and how did the police respond to that?

Mr KINGMA: Yes. I was not there. I know the farmer; I could easily ask. I cannot answer a time line. The issue with farmers is often we are isolated and remote. My town only has one police station, so if he is not in his hour of shift, he cannot come. So therefore they have got to come from another 40 minutes away—the next policeman—so a response can be a difficult thing in remote areas and for farmers.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much for coming, Tim. We appreciate your attendance here today. You mentioned the Aussie Farms website, when that came up, and you mentioned your having to talk someone down, I think, from a very bad state. What we do not want to see, and I believe all of us here do not want to see that happening as a regular occurrence or I personally do not. Could you explain what you had to do and how you feel that the State Government should be supporting those people, as in the farmers?

Mr KINGMA: For that example, I was on the phone for over an hour. We actually had family guests over for the evening so that had to go on hold. While I spoke to him, we talked through about getting some friends over. We got his wife to call his closer mates that were nearby, so they came and stayed the night with him. Really, from my point of view as the VFF pig group president, as an industry, I just talked to him about, ‘Well, you are a legally operating business’. Our APIQ standard, which is our quality assurance program, is world leading. Other things we have done as an industry are that we were the first one in the world to voluntarily remove sow stalls. They were the things I was saying to him. I said, ‘Mate, as an industry we’re world leaders and we’re doing things as well as anyone in the world, so be proud’. It was all about talking him through it like that. Fortunately, we do share some things, like truck drivers for maybe feed, so there is that little personal touch and it is just continually touching base with each other. I guess since then every time I talk at a VFF function I always try and leave with one of my last comments always being, ‘Just touch base with your neighbour—the bloke next door. We’ve just got to keep touching base with each other’, because the figures for rural people and mental health, and the worst-case scenario of suicide, are just too great.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much. You answered a number of my other questions that were tucked in there in your response. If I move to the on-farm activists of the person that you know, what sort of ballpark figure would that have cost that business and what flow-on effects would that have had in the local town?

Mr KINGMA: Yes. It is probably hard for me to talk about an individual farmer’s experience with it. If it was to happen on mine, obviously there would be a number of issues with staff not doing their normal routine daily jobs, and the impact on the pigs that would be there. There are issues there with the re-sorting of each size in the pens. But for me I guess the bigger picture is if we have got the ASF or something like that on my farm and the whole farm is shut down. I employ 12 people and that goes a long way to filling up a fifth of the local school with kids of people I employ. If all of a sudden they are unemployed—

As a group of farmers in our region we own a feed mill; that then has more impacts. The indirect impacts of our farm going out of business would be immense for our small community that relies on pigs and dairy.

Mr GEPP: Thanks for coming, Tim, and for the presentation. I have two quick questions around biosecurity. The plan that you have outlined that you have got on your farm is quite extensive. Is that common practice through pig farms, that sort of plan, and how much would you estimate that you spend? What is the cost to your business of your biosecurity plan on an annual basis? I do not know whether you have costed it, but ballpark.

Mr KINGMA: Yes, no probs. In terms of the industry, it is part of our requirements in our quality assurance program. As an industry, I believe over 90 per cent of the industry is under this one particular program. It is audited by third parties, so there are no conflicts. It is independent in terms of auditing us, and it is all around food safety, animal welfare and biosecurity—and the list goes on. For me that is a big number in the industry.

In terms of the cost: obviously people showering, in and out, is half an hour of the day gone already at the start and at the end of the day; providing all the clothing; staff meetings; and then we have vets come on at least every three months. Part of those staff meetings is based around our biosecurity plans. We do internal audits of our biosecurity plans. Are they strong enough? What can we improve? And with the vets we do other things as well. We have a herd health plan, we have approved medication lists and all those different things. I think we are very well regulated, and we get support from so many different areas.

Mr GEPP: But it is not cheap.

Mr KINGMA: And it is not cheap—no way.

Mr BARTON: G'day Tim. Tim, I just want to touch on something we spoke about before, and it is something we have been hearing repeatedly, which is that there is a genuine concern and a real fear for people living out on the farms. We actually heard of a young family who have chosen not to live on their farm. Have you heard of that up here as well—moving off the properties?

Mr KINGMA: No, I have not heard of that happening to anyone locally, so no, I cannot answer.

Mr BARTON: The other thing I am a little bit concerned about is the perception that there are widespread problems with animal welfare. Can you just tell us a little bit about the regulations and how much time that comes in from the regulators? Do you get checks unannounced, for instance, from the ag department? Just tell us about your requirements and what happens there.

Mr KINGMA: Yes, we have an audit once a year for our QA program, which covers off on a number of things. I then employ someone to do an internal one every six months in between. Every month we also have staff meetings around it as one of the topics. Then in terms of outside agencies, in the last 12 months I have had WorkSafe come in and do an audit. That would be, yes, the only one I can think of outside of the ones that I have paid for. And then at the end of the day, the department can come on whenever they want as part of their rules.

Mr BARTON: So you do not get any warning? The department can just come in?

Mr KINGMA: I have never had the experience, so I cannot tell you. In terms of WorkSafe, he did ring me to book a time the following week. I think the department understands our industry—that they could not just go, if you were a pig farmer, from yours to mine in the one day. So I think they would make the phone call, unless there was a report of something that was not right. And then it might be a different set of rules.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Tim. I am just wondering if you could explain to us how our animal welfare practices in your industry compare in Victoria to other states and then internationally. Where are we in the ladder of animal welfare practices, do you think?

Mr KINGMA: My personal view is that we are world-leading. Like I said earlier, as an industry we are the only ones in the world to have voluntarily removed certain aspects, not necessarily meaning it is better for the welfare of animals but there are some community expectations. But in terms of our practices, I believe we are world-leading, and we get audited. Even within Australia I think our industry is one of the more highly regulated.

Mrs McARTHUR: In Victoria?

Mr KINGMA: Yes, in Victoria and in the country—compared to other countries, is what I mean.

Mrs McARTHUR: And do Australian or Victorian pig producers get a premium for their product because they are world leaders in this area of animal welfare?

Mr KINGMA: Yes—

Mrs McARTHUR: Is your product well-regarded?

Mr KINGMA: We all have different markets, but Coles—the two major supermarkets obviously have certain markets, and then they choose to do different things. I would get benefits in their market. We all choose to market things differently, but that is a business choice. For me I just feel that I am a legally operating business, and to have people come on illegally, I just cannot get that.

Mrs McARTHUR: But Australia has a very big export market in pork products.

Mr KINGMA: No, not really. We are very small.

Mrs McARTHUR: No, very small?

Mr KINGMA: We are an importer of pork more than exporter.

Mrs McARTHUR: Right. Are we?

Mr KINGMA: Yes. So get ham off the bone if you are going to support Aussie pig farmers.

Mrs McARTHUR: How does that go with the biosecurity issues?

Mr KINGMA: I believe our standards in Australia are world-leading, but we are happy to import stuff that is not at the same standard. So for me, let us support Aussie farmers because our standards are world-leading.

The CHAIR: Do you believe your business has been targeted?

Mr KINGMA: Mine personally, not yet, but I am on the Aussie maps and it is a matter of when, not if. That is what we talk about in our staffroom. I just cannot imagine many businesses in Australia, at their monthly staff meeting—we have a barbecue at the start of the month and we talk; I would not think many businesses would be talking about what we do when an activist illegally trespasses our business.

Mr GEPP: Just one final question, Tim: is there anything that you believe you or your industry can do that would satisfy the animal activists in terms of the treatment of animals?

Mr KINGMA: No. In my opinion—I think I said earlier, animal welfare and animal activists are two different things. I am passionate about animal welfare, and I would be disappointed if 100 per cent of Australians are not passionate about animal welfare, because that is about caring for animals. We do that every day of our lives. Animal activists do not want us to eat meat, in my opinion, and they are the extremists that are coming onto farms, trespassing illegally. So there is nothing that will ever appease them, in my opinion.

Ms BATH: It is an issue that has been raised before, and you touched on it earlier, but I just want to drill down into it: you said that your industry was the first in the country to volunteer to remove sow stalls. Could you explain what they were and what you now do differently? I think it is important to unpack that if anybody is going to read the Hansard transcript in the future.

Mr KINGMA: Yes, no probs. Sow stalls were a way to individually look after an animal. The science, in my understanding—and I am not a scientist, I am a pig farmer—is actually it is beneficial. Logically it makes sense. If I have an animal that is smaller than another one, it is going to need more feed or individual care, so stalls have a really big place to play. A lot of countries that export pork to Australia use stalls because they know they are actually better for the animals. In Australia we have different consumer expectations so as an industry we chose to remove them and put them into group housing. Not necessarily is that better for the welfare of the animals, not 100 per cent, but there are techniques that we all use in our management practices that look after the animals in the group systems. That is probably why—it was a choice to make as an industry around consumers.

Ms BATH: To meet community expectations or consumer expectations?

Mr KINGMA: That is right.

Mrs McARTHUR: As opposed to animal welfare.

Mr KINGMA: Yes. I think there would probably be arguments on both sides, but I just know as a manager of pigs it is harder to control the group rather than the individual.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and your contribution. You will receive a copy of the transcript for your proofreading.

Mr KINGMA: Thanks, Mr Chair, and thanks, everyone.

Witness withdrew.