

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Horsham—Wednesday, 18 September 2019

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Mr Craig Ondarchie

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Ms Mary Wooldridge

Dr Catherine Cumming

WITNESSES

Mr Paul Christopher, Horsham Saleyard Manager,

Mr Richard James, Naracoorte Saleyard Manager,

Mr Mark McDonald, Executive Officer, and

Ms Sally Ison, Horsham Producer and Stock Agent, Australian Livestock Saleyard Association.

The CHAIR: Thank you and good afternoon. 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Before we start, please can you state your name for the Hansard record and then allow us some time to ask you questions.

Mr McDONALD: I will start. First, thanks for giving us this opportunity to have a private hearing. We just thought it would be a good opportunity to mainly talk to the letter we put in as a submission and also to have some on-the-ground saleyard managers give their view of what has happened.

We just refer to the letter. The main takeaway point in that is that our membership to date has been pretty lucky. We have had people turn up, usually individuals, and some organised groups, like Animal Angels et cetera, who work within the rules. But we have not had an incident where we have had large numbers turn up with loudspeakers et cetera that have actually disrupted the sale. But we wrote in our submission that we do not believe that our sector is very well organised if that happens.

I suppose, to cut to the chase, there are four points that we put in our submission that we would like to see addressed. I think the current trespass rules probably make it pretty difficult. The saleyard environment is quite a challenging one. As most of you would understand, we have the owners and the managers, who in many cases are councils, so it is a public space. You have got a large number of stakeholders—there are buyers, there are agents, there are transporters and there is the public there—so it is quite a difficult space in terms of trying to manage all those people and how they react in certain situations. So bearing that in mind we would like to see some tougher rules for trespass that would make it easier to manage these sorts of incidents if they happen. We would probably require some better coordination and training of that whole saleyard stakeholder group to manage these sorts of events. I will get Paul Christopher to talk about that in a minute, because they are doing some work on that in Horsham here. We have actually got a members workshop in February, which includes a training session with MLA on advocacy and having to train our people to deal with these sorts of situations on the ground. On support for better or tougher bylaws, with the council-owned yards it is quite difficult for them because it is a public space. For privately owned saleyards it is a different matter because it is not a public space and they can control access in certain ways that the council yards cannot. I suppose we would like to see that if people do take on this sort of activity and are arrested that if they go to court they get a reasonable penalty and not just a slap on the wrist.

As I say, we have been pretty lucky to date—this is a generalisation—in terms of not getting an organised group of 10, 20 people with loudspeakers interrupting the sale, but we are aware it has happened at Pakenham, which is not a member of ours, and also in WA and in some saleyards up in New South Wales. So I just think at this stage, if we had an event like that, I am not sure whether it would be handled very well at the moment. So that is our opening position.

The CHAIR: Sally, do you want to read your statement?

Ms ISON: Well, mine is sort of separate to you guys. I have actually written down what I wanted to say, so I am saying it from my perspective. Do you mind if I read that out?

The CHAIR: No, not at all.

Ms ISON: My name is Sallyann Ison, and I want to tell you a little bit about myself so you get a good understanding of why I have come today. I have been in the stock and station industry since 1986—so 33 years. I was brought up on a dairy farm and we grew predominantly cereal crops and lucerne hay. Currently I live on a farm with my husband and three children, and we run a farming business and have three properties, in the Wimmera, the Grampians and in the Mallee. And I am also in the stock and station industry. On our farm we have sheep, alpacas, working dogs, house dogs and cats, and my 11-year-old has tropical fish and a horse, which we look after very well. I am also an animal lover and detest cruelty to animals—always have and always will. So I have a good perspective of the livestock industry as a stockyard and station employee and also as a producer and farmer.

I was quite apprehensive coming today because I feel I personally could be targeted by animal activists on my farming properties for speaking my mind, which is quite a worry with a young family. But I also knew it was very important to speak up and let my voice be heard to stop this harassment. This year our business, which is DMD, was targeted by a group of people through our social media Facebook page. Most weeks we will go out to the saleyards and take footage of our auctioneers auctioning stock and put it up on Facebook, on our Facebook page. One particular day we put up on our Facebook page a beautiful run of Merino wethers that were being auctioned. The stock were in excellent condition. A post was then shared by this particular group, and then on-shared, maliciously in my opinion, throughout similar Facebook sites. What was really disturbing were the personal comments—very nasty and totally unwarranted in this instance.

So it is a little bit different to you guys, where they were there. This was done through social media, which is still not good. A staff member, who took the footage, was quite distraught, thinking that they had done something wrong when they were simply going about their job. I myself became quite stressed—and then that turned into anger—about the situation, making me feel quite sick to the stomach with the comments made to us, which were extremely unnecessary. The auctioneer and staff had footage of them shared around for the world to see, implying they were being cruel, which is unfair and unjust. That stays out there forever.

I have personally seen, over the past 30 years, animal welfare in our industry improve enormously, which we should be very proud of. Our industry leaders, such as ALPA, RMA and VFF, are constantly educating agents regularly on animal welfare, and I believe we are a leader in the world on this. Our saleyard operators have very strict animal welfare standards that we all are required to abide by. Our department of ag is always available to assist both agents and producers on any welfare requirement and education. I also believe Australia is the most proactive country in the world with sheep production and animal welfare. It is a very proud industry and always looking to improve with when required.

What I am trying to get through to you, the panel, is simply that we are law-abiding Australians going about our daily jobs and we should not have to put up with malicious activists who are doing their utmost to try and stop our industry continuing—and they make no secret of this. Legislation should be in place to stop this ugly behaviour and the penalties that go with it should be much more strict to deter future activists. As a panel I believe you have a duty to your law-abiding citizens to protect them by having harsher penalties than what are current, and I truly hope you can see that.

I call this harassment or intention to promote their cause by maliciously implying cruelty, when there was no cruelty involved, to get people on board to be part of their groups. Seeing TV footage of what happened at the goat farm, the duck farm incident and other footage—in their all-white clothing, trespassing on private property—to me is cult like and very misinformed.

So now I hope you have more understanding of how I feel and how it affects people. I feel now I will be looking over my shoulder whilst I am doing nothing at all wrong, wondering if activists will target me for saying this.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sally. Paul, did you want to add anything?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Yes, thank you. I am the Manager of the local saleyards—I have been for 14 years. Before that I was a shearer for 25 years, so I have had a fair bit to do with animals over the years. I concur with Sally that welfare has improved from when I started at the saleyards to what it is now. It has improved even in the last five years. As far as animals being put down, we had 10 000 that were in our market today. I have come

in for that, and I think we put down three. None of them were diseased. It was because they had been injured on the truck or something like that. As soon as we can, we euthanise. We have been trained in that by vets. We euthanise so they are put out of their misery. That is my bugbear since I have been there. I am the same as Sally—I have run my own sheep. My wife is a qualified veterinary nurse, so I get hammered about animal welfare. I have got a conscience so if we find anything that is not toward I would rather euthanise than see them suffer. It is not my favourite job—anyone will tell you. Do not come out on a sale day because I am grumpy if I have got to put sheep down. I do not like doing it, but I would rather see animals not suffer. That seems to contravene what some people think. They think that we are Neanderthals and we do not care. Well, we do care. As a farmer I care, and in my job I care.

Cancers and stuff like that are not the norm anymore. That used to be the case. It is not the case anymore, and if it is, it is something that has been missed. You might see a small cancer on a vulva or something like that—that is very hard to see when sheep are running up a race or something like that. The agents, to their credit, will pull them out and we will deal with them straightaway. That is from that that side of things.

As far as what Mark was talking about, what we are doing with activism, I am a member of WASAG, it is called—so Wimmera Agriculture Sector Action Group. It is a new model that is starting across Victoria. Senior Sergeant Simon Grant has put us together. There are welfare people, there are financial people, there are agents on it, there is myself, there is the police, there is the department and there is game management. We are all in there, and it is about the whole ag sector—what we can do. It was brought together for farm crime more than anything, but it is about biosecurity and everything. So we all get together. There is also the VFF, I beg your pardon. David Jochinke is on it as well. We are working on dot points. It all came about as a result of the animal activism day. Was that in April?

Ms BATH: April.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: April, yes. The meeting was actually three days before that, and some of the VFF members there were poultry farmers. I did not know anything about it. We had only just put this group together. The angst that they were showing was concerning to me. I had not realised that these poultry farmers had said that they were so worried that people were going to breach their biosecurity lines and get into their sheds. Because if they got inside their sheds, with their level of biosecurity, those chickens that were in there—forgive me, I cannot remember the numbers but it was 10 000 or 20 000 chickens in their shed—would all have to be euthanised because he could not guarantee the biosecurity of those animals when they went out the other end. The pain on his face was very concerning to me. I had never heard that before. Also his children—I say children, but they are young adults in their 30s—had got together with other local farmers on social media. It was going to be that if anyone got affected they were going to push a button and they were all going to come together to help each other. He was worried then that his law-abiding sons were going to do something against the activism and not be law-abiding. It was concerning for me that there was someone of my age or a little older who wanted to do the right thing but was worried that this was going to go over. That was one thing there.

From that, we decided that we wanted to put out some dot points. Now, with the saleyards, with biosecurity, we have had this hammered into us—if we have a stock standstill to do with foot-and-mouth. We have got protocols there on the wall that we have to keep updated every six months. They are ‘What would happen if’ dot points and what we will do. With WASAG we were going to do the same thing for farmers. It is hard when you are in that stressful situation to know what to do next.

Now, with the police and that, it was quite good. Basically it was ‘Take photo footage’. Sorry, I cannot remember exactly what it was, or what order it was. It was, ‘Call 000’, do this, ‘Ask them to leave’. I for one found that was a great thing. I find my stock standstill a great thing, because if foot-and-mouth ever comes and I was told to stop, it would be, ‘You have got 20 000 animals out of it. What do we do with them next?’. So you have got a pro forma that you can follow. That is something that I think we need to do in our saleyards industry as well, so this will stand beside our stock standstill. If this happens, what do we do next? Call the police first, and what measures do we take? As the Manager of that saleyard, I have got to look after my employees, but I also have to look after the agents that Sally was talking about. I feel that I am under their control as well. Some of them can get quite heated, as the farmers will—you know, if you ever get impeded by that sort of thing. So it can be challenging.

At Horsham, we have had Animal Angels come through. Probably as far as activism goes, they are probably some of the best there are. They are quite reasonable. But even that can cause angst when they are going around pen to pen, telling you there is something wrong and me arguing and saying, 'Well, I've been in the industry a long time as well'. I have got my thoughts on what they are. My thoughts are backed up by the department, that do regular checks. They check on me. They check on my bookwork and make sure that we are doing the right thing. They have spot checks. One of the ones Animal Angels found out was sheep with long toenails, and they said that they should not be in there. I said, 'Yes, but it's not against the law to have long toenails. If it caused that animal to limp because it broke the toenail, yes, I agree then that it's my problem because the sheep is limping and it has got to be able to weight bear on four legs'. So there are things like that. Of course the agents get up in arms as soon as they see someone new there. 'You don't have to worry. You're not doing anything wrong. We're not doing anything wrong, so it's fine. But when they hop in the pens, push the sheep up, as we talked about before, that can cause its own problems, so we try to keep them out of those pens, where they are not meant to be. The only other one was a single activist that came to Horsham. She would just come in periodically and ring me up and tell me stuff was wrong. Then I would go there and there was not anything wrong. It was her perception that something was wrong. I have probably rambled on long enough.

Mr McDONALD: We have distributed a protocol for our members for what to do in such a case, if activists turn up. The key weakness in that whole process is the local coppers basically. That is where there needs to be a bit more coordination between the saleyard stakeholders and the local police so they all know what they can and cannot do on the day. That, I think, would be our key area of concern if something happened and the men in blue came down and they were not quite sure what they needed to do and the whole thing just turned to—

The CHAIR: Thank you. Richard, would you like to add anything quickly before we go to questions?

Mr JAMES: Yes, just a couple of minor things. It is a worksite and it is important with the occupational health and safety that everybody is looked after while they are on site. We are concerned about animal welfare and biosecurity. The last thing we want is someone walking into a high-risk area and opening gates to let stock out et cetera. It is just an absolute concern when you are trying to manage the whole facility on a sale day. Our sale days are a regular Tuesday market. Yesterday we had 1400 cattle and about 7000 sheep and lambs, so it is just starting to get moving a little bit now. There was a fair bit on yesterday. We had one chap; he had an incident and got damaged by a cow throwing him over a fence. He is okay, but this is the sort of thing. With people that come on site that have got no idea about animals and that sort of thing, it is a very high risk.

The other thing is the MLA has brought out a booklet, and you have probably already seen that. That is the *Is It Fit to Load?* guide, and I will leave one of them here if anybody wants to have a look at it. That describes what sort of stock we do not want to see in the saleyards. As far as euthanasia goes, all of our staff have been qualified and have done a euthanasia course and have destroyed stock at different times, so we do it in the most humane way possible. But those stock should not be in the yards in the first place. However, you do get an incident where something happens on the truck. That is about all I have got to say at this point in time.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Now we will go to questions.

Mr GEPP: Hi, everyone. Thank you for coming along today. I just want to ask a couple of questions. Can you run me through on the sale day the biosecurity measures that you go through at the saleyards? That is number one. On the second question, for whoever wants to answer it, we have heard testimony from other witnesses and we have had farmers talk about unauthorised access onto their property and we have heard about livestock transport, that that should be an extension of the farm and the obvious suggestion is that the saleyard becomes the other extension of the farm. So I am wondering what your views are about that.

Mr JAMES: Just as far as probably one of the issues that we have at this time of year is foot scald and that sort of thing, and the possibility of footrot. Primary industries are on location in our yards every sale, so they will go round and do an inspection anyway, but I have put together a footbath so that anybody that comes onto the saleyard, if there are any issues with foot soreness and that sort of thing, they obviously wash their boots before they go to their own properties. What else?

Mr McDONALD: Biosecurity goes all week. It is a process that they do before the sale starts to make sure it is clean and the water is there and all of that sort of stuff, and then during the actual process of putting them

into pens and taking them out and delivering them and then post-sale again there is a whole process that is just repeated sale after sale after sale.

Mr JAMES: So what happens if say there was an animal activist that went onto one property and then went onto another property, there is the issue with cross-contamination.

Mr GEPP: Yes.

Mr JAMES: So the other thing, you are probably all pretty aware of Border Force and that sort of thing and the biosecurity there and the amount of meat products that are coming into the country that are prohibited. We do not know where they are going to end up either, so there are certainly some concerns there.

Mr GEPP: That is a bit out of our jurisdiction.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: So again, with the WASAG section group that I am in they have actually asked me now if I can put a footbath in at Horsham. That is something I am looking at now. That was brought about for biosecurity because we have also got crop people, and the agent that was at our meeting said for the last month he has been asked to actually jump into the farmer's car to go around to look at the stock. He would not actually take the agent's car, because he goes to so many different farms. So it is actually getting out there and it is a bigger thing. I was lucky enough two years ago to go to Nepal and actually do training on foot-and-mouth disease, so I have been one of the ones that has gone up in the suits and all that sort of stuff. I realise that ours is not as intense as that, but it is heading that way.

Mr GEPP: We heard from a witness just before lunch and he was talking about how anybody can come onto his farm but at a time of his choosing and under the circumstances which he prescribes. So he takes that level of biosecurity very, very seriously. Particularly your agents who would visit multiple farms, I am just wondering whether you are reliant on the farmers for that biosecurity or is there, when you are all back at the saleyards, another level that you go through?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Not at this stage. Most agents will change their boots. If anyone has been to the saleyards and then goes back to the farm, it is probably not a good idea because there are so many commingled animals coming in. So if you go to the saleyards and then go to another farm, you would not know what you are passing on. So that is why we are going to offer this footbathing, so people can actually scrub their boots and stuff.

Mr McDONALD: We have distributed a biosecurity protocol which is sort of a national template, but it is not compulsory at this stage. That covers all sorts of stuff: feed, water, contamination, dead animals—the whole lot.

Mr GEPP: I am really interested in the New South Wales Government. I am sure you are all aware of the measures that they have taken in relation to this space, and they have actually increased penalties, but it is directly related to the *Biosecurity Act*. But it is very hard to do that if the protocols are nothing more than guidelines.

Mr JAMES: There is the national vendor declaration, which is the LPA national vendor declaration. That has got a biosecurity element in it now. That is another upgrade from that.

Mr McDONALD: Your second question regarding the transport—that is an issue. There are concerns that people could come on and let dogs out of their truck and things like that. So that is why it is a difficult workplace for the owners and managers of saleyards, because you have got so many stakeholders that you are trying to manage and in a heated situation you are worrying.

Ms BATH: Thank you for your presentation this afternoon, lady and gentlemen. I want to just focus on some of your comments, Sally, in relation to the targeted campaign of vilification against one of your staff who put up some footage—

Ms ISON: Yes, yes, and I have brought some pictures and some comments if you would like to have a look.

Ms BATH: Thank you. So that was going to be part of my question. They were conducting a normal activity on social media.

Ms ISON: Yes.

Ms BATH: And then they were highly targeted, by the sounds of it, in an offensive way. Is that correct?

Ms ISON: Well, we were called ‘human scum’. That is just the start of it. It just got shared on and shared on. They were all quite similar groups with the same, I suppose, thoughts. Yes, it was really quite alarming. I am over it a bit now, but at the time it was really awful. It was just dreadful. We thought, ‘Oh, my goodness, is this going to be on television? Is this going to be on whatever?’. It was stressful, and it was very stressful for the girl that actually went out and took it. She was extremely upset. She was just going about her normal day. She should not have to go to work and have that happen to her.

Ms BATH: And so do you have—I guess my question was going to be around—any documentation identifying those groups or who they were or the like?

Ms ISON: Yes.

Ms BATH: If you have any of that, it would be great if you could provide that to the Committee.

Ms ISON: Sure. Yes.

Ms BATH: And the other question: did you provide any of this occurrence to the police? I will let you answer that.

Ms ISON: No, I did not, because I would not have even thought to have done that because it was social media. I did think too, and I am still debating whether to do it, to go to Facebook myself and see if they could get these people to stop doing this type of thing. But, yes, I probably need a bit of help with that.

Ms BATH: Certainly, and there are mechanisms to block et cetera.

Ms ISON: Yes.

Ms BATH: But I guess the point that we sometimes hear in this Committee is that the incidence of aggressive behaviour or targeted activist behaviour is not that great, but this is a clear example of where it is not on-farm but certainly a targeted vilification behaviour. So we would love to understand what some recommendations are that you would have. If you could have a choice, what would you like to see in respect of this sort of issue?

Ms ISON: Well, I think that no matter whether it is social media or whether it is face-to-face, it is wrong. We were not doing anything wrong. They should be accountable for scaremongering other people and saying that we are doing something wrong we are actually not doing. So I believe that \$1 fine, which everybody probably knows about, was a joke. A dollar is nothing—a fine, I am talking about—for really ruining some people’s lives. It is disgraceful.

Ms BATH: That relates to something I was going to ask Mark, but it is open to anybody who would like to answer. Mark, in your presentation you talked about trespass rules, and then you talked about them being very difficult. I would just like you to elaborate on that, and I guess my point is that at the moment with the current legislation there is no minimum penalty. What is your position on that? What are your thoughts on that?

Mr McDONALD: Two things there. I suppose higher penalties; we would support that. We are not legal experts.

Ms BATH: No.

Mr McDONALD: But the advice we have on the trespass is that the current rules make it quite difficult to move these people on once they decide to turn up and create a nuisance, and in particular for council saleyards where it is a public site. It is slightly different if you are a privately owned yard. There are different trespass

components of the law that apply. So yes, we would like to see something that would make it a bit easier for the trespass laws, to make it a bit easier to remove people who are obviously interfering with the sale.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you all for your presentation here this afternoon and for your submission. Sally, this is a comment that I made to somebody yesterday as well, and I make it to you. Under no circumstances do I feel that anybody should be vilified on social media. It will not surprise you to know that this actually occurs on both sides of the fence—

Ms ISON: Sure.

Mr MEDDICK: and in quite serious fashion. For a female activist who lives alone there is actually a single Facebook site that has been set up with the specific task of tracking her down to commit rape, and that is what they have done. I am happy to say that this is being discussed amongst the Legislative Council as something going forward and what things we might be able to do. I think you are right; I think Facebook has a lot to answer for. Social media has been a great tool over the years, but it has also been a bit of a double-edged sword, and I would like to see all of that sort of stuff gone. So my apologies that this has occurred to your employee.

In a broader sense for everybody, in your submission you state that activists have been at this point in time relatively easy to manage, have generally not been intrusive and have pointed out animal welfare issues such as pen densities and fitness for sale. First of all, how have you responded to the animal welfare issues that have been raised? Then I have another question, and Mark, you were bringing this up. I am confused about your biosecurity protocol. Has that been finalised as a total package? Would you like to see that as something that is rolled out, so enforced right across the board to all saleyards, not just in Victoria but across the country, as something that would be an improvement for your industry?

Mr McDONALD: Yes. As I said, it was originally done in Queensland via the Queensland department of ag. It has been made available to the whole industry, the biosecurity protocol. So at this stage it is a voluntary option. To make it mandatory could be quite difficult, especially on a national basis. The process in the saleyard, what becomes best practice eventually might become not so much legislated but what would go into their protocols.

Mr MEDDICK: But if biosecurity is such an issue and such a concern, surely a legislated and mandatory procedure would alleviate that concern?

Mr JAMES: Well, actually it already is. I just said about the national vendor declaration—the LPA livestock production assurance program—has an element in there of biosecurity. So anybody that wants to sell any livestock has to have that as—

Mr MEDDICK: Yes, but I am talking about on the saleyards themselves, because I am talking about—

Mr JAMES: Every animal that comes into a saleyard has to have a vendor dec.

Mr MEDDICK: I am talking about people actually coming onto the saleyards. I think, Paul, you were just saying that you are bringing onto the saleyard yourself, voluntarily, footbaths, but they have not previously existed.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: No.

Mr MEDDICK: So to my mind that speaks to a fact that it is not mandatory. And if biosecurity is such a concern, and I believe it should be, this should be something that should be legislated and mandatory for everybody concerned—the attendees at the saleyards, the farmers, everybody coming and the general public. That alleviates that concern across the board. Is that a fair thing to think?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: I think we are stuck on the biosecurity as far as taking dung off and whatever. Biosecurity is a lot more than that. As you would be aware, Victoria mandated electronic ear tagging for sheep, and that is to do with biosecurity so we can trace things. We know that some of these people, with activism—and I think the Gippy Goat was one—they took out the ear tag. If you have been to Nepal or you have been to Kenya, the places where they have foot-and-mouth, we do not want it. If they took that tag out and they took it

somewhere else and it got foot-and-mouth, how would we know where else? So that is the other side of biosecurity. It is not only the muck. We have always had boot scrapers and stuff like that, since we opened 20 years ago, so they can actually clean their boots off; they can change their boots. Our next step, voluntarily, what we have thought is, 'When we bring in this, yes, we'll put the citric acid in it'. And I am not going to sit there and put 400 people in a headlock and make them clean their boots. It is going to be—

Mr MEDDICK: You look big enough.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: It is a voluntary thing, so they can. I will be doing it myself, because I am a farmer myself, and I will be asking my workers to do it. And I would say that the agencies would probably look at using it, Sal?

Ms ISON: Yes.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: So this is an ongoing thing. When we are talking about biosecurity, I am more talking about the eartags and the vendor declarations, so then it does get somewhere and we are doing it that way.

Mr McDONALD: It is very hard to get national legislation in the saleyard environment, because most of any legislation is on a state basis. We have been through that recently with the animal welfare process. So that is an issue.

But the other part you mentioned, you were referring to Animals' Angels. They regularly attend saleyards with the vet and some of their staff, and they provide a written report afterwards which is widely distributed. They are quite a reasonable group, because they work within the rules. They understand what the current rules are in terms of animal welfare et cetera, and they will then highlight and say, 'I think you need more signage' or 'pen density' or whatever it is on the day that they have picked up. Our advice to member saleyards is, 'If their requests are reasonable, you should comply', because they are being reasonable about the whole process and they are not turning up with loudhailers or any of this sort of stuff. They are just going around doing their job. When it gets into subjective-type areas, particularly things like, say, pen density, or even the 'fit to load' of certain animals, it can be subjective. It is up to the yard on the day to make that sort of decision. But as I said, they are quite a reasonable group to work with.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: In saying that, Mark, when you receive a report and the report is not like what has happened on the ground and on every dot point it says, 'You can be fined \$250 000', it is quite daunting. It is quite daunting. I know my job, and you have asked what do we do. They will pull up something that they say is lame, and I will say, 'Well, no, it's not lame. Yes, it's got a bit of a limp, but it can weight bear on all four legs'. And that is where it gets tricky. I will bring the vet in, but they are not a large-animal vet. They are probably a vet that has been looking after cats and dogs for most of their life. And as we know, there are vets and vets. My wife has been in the industry. We helped train a young Italian vet. She had to come out and look at our sheep and our horses. She still does not look at them now; she only looks after cats and dogs.

Mr MEDDICK: Do you ever have agreement? Do you have agreement with them?

Mr McDONALD: Normally what happens when they come around, you get the report later on, not so much on the day. They tend not to come up and blow the whistle and say, 'This sheep here' or whatever. You will get a report a couple of weeks later.

Mr MEDDICK: Is that how you prefer that to happen?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: I have got a ledger in my office. You can come there, and if you find something, you can fill out the ledger and then I will action it. And that is what happened on the day. She wrote it down, and that is how we do it.

Mr MEDDICK: I have got no more questions. Thanks, mate.

Ms BATH: Just one final question: would they bring their own vet? Is that what you are saying?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Yes, they bring their own vet.

Ms BATH: Right. Thank you.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: See, we have actually got the department vet that comes out. So am I told by the department vet, or do I listen to their vet?

Ms BATH: Well, the department vet is supposed to be impartial.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: The department vet is the one that can put me in trouble.

Ms BATH: Correct.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you all for coming today. Sally, my apologies for what you and your staff have had to endure. It is absolutely, totally unacceptable. Paul and the group, would it be fair to say that farmers, agents, yard managers and all those involved in this industry actually understand the biosecurity problems that can exist and voluntarily know that it is in everybody's interest to do the right thing in the saleyards or on the farm or with the transports? And to suggest that you have got to all comply to some mandatory rule and regulation now that we have moved down this path of mandatory activity, is that reasonable? Have you encountered problems in the past with all of this, with farmers or agents being irresponsible in how they have moved from one yard to another or one farm to another? Then I have another question after that.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Could I answer that? There are different levels. We have farmers that come in that have got their own self-replacing mobs. So nothing new comes in; maybe a ram occasionally that would be footbathed. So they would come in here—and of course they will change their boots and they will do everything because if they sell rams they do not want any of that. Then we will get people that come in that might put through 20 000 lambs a year through a feedlot. So they are coming. So their biosecurity is probably not going to be as harsh as a fellow who is breeding on his farm and does not want it, because he is commingling so many mobs anyway. I am not saying he was not going to do any level of biosecurity, but there will be different levels. I think that Australian farmers are adults; I think they can work it out. And it is getting more and more, especially around our area because of cropping, that they do not want weed seeds and they do not want diseases. I think that farmers, agents and even truck drivers, they are washing down between mobs because they know that they have got to be careful. So it is getting done without being mandated.

Mr McDONALD: It is not as cut and dried either, because potentially this template that is being sent around covers a number of areas. But potentially it could be the sheep with lice that could be a problem. Should they be at the saleyard? You have also got the issue of all the other market chains. So it is not just the saleyards. It is going direct or going to a feedlot, going to another producer. Really, the biosecurity should apply to all of those market chains, not just the saleyard.

Mr JAMES: The saleyards provide a truck wash so that trucks are cleaned before each and every load, and that also reduces the spread of weeds and the risk of disease being carried onto another property. So that is an important part of a saleyard.

Mr GEPP: Do all trucks use the wash?

Mr JAMES: Pardon?

Mr GEPP: Do all trucks use the wash?

Mr JAMES: Yes, they are supposed to.

Mr GEPP: Well, I know they are supposed to, but do they?

Mr McDONALD: We have got a seven-bay truck wash there so that we cater for, say, four B-doubles and smaller trucks and trailers, utes—all that sort of thing. Currently, because of the drought in New South Wales and northern Victoria, the access to truck washes is a bit harsh up there because there is a shortage of water. So a lot of the transport operators that I spoke to at a recent conference, they have to travel 200 or 300 kilometres

to a truck wash so they can wash their truck out. So that is how far they are going out of their way to make sure that they are not spreading any weeds, diseases.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Can I just say, you asked if they all do. It depends on what they are doing. If they are going from farm to farm, yes, they would. But if they were going to a processor—

Mr GEPP: And they are those different levels that you were talking about?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Yes, that is right. So if it goes from a processor, they might not, but you will find the processors will soon be jumping on them if they receive stock that are messy. So they do wash out, whether they wash out here or they wash out in Ballarat. I am not going to say every truck that leaves Horsham is washed because they are not, but they could be going to Ballarat to wash, they could be going to somewhere else—because their bosses would soon get them in trouble if they did not.

Mr BARTON: I just want to go back a little bit. You spoke about stronger rules and you support higher fines. Do you support on-the-spot fines, going down that area?

Mr McDONALD: I do not know how practical that would be. One of my brothers is a copper, and I have asked him about, ‘What would happen if you had to come out to a saleyard?’, and then I have asked other coppers because I am involved in the AGLO group, and you almost get a different answer every time about what they are going to do if they have to turn up to a saleyard. So that is a bit of a worry. I am not sure if on-the-spots would—they could possibly inflame the situation as well, I reckon, in some regards. We would just like to see that, whatever the law is, if they have broken it and they are charged, and if it gets to court, there is an adequate penalty. Does that make sense?

Mr BARTON: Yes. So that goes back to the current legislation, where it can be a dollar.

Mr McDONALD: Yes.

Mr BARTON: So just going on with the police, you said your concern is that one of the weak links is the police, and I am assuming that is not a reflection on the police officer at all but it is about the interpretation of the rules.

Mr McDONALD: It is probably their training—that a lot of them have never been at a saleyard, and then they get out there and it is a great mass of people and noise and all the rest of it. It is one of the issues that we have discussed with the AGLOs, their group, that there should be a bit more training in this area. That is part of what is going to happen in this workshop we have got in February. It is to try and get that message out to the police so that there is just a bit more—

What Paul’s group has here is good—it is not a bad model. It is that all the local stakeholders have got some involvement. So at least if something happens, they all know what they can and cannot do and who is going to do it.

Mr BARTON: Clarity over the situation there, so you have a plan.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: The trouble that they are finding is that they are getting a lot of young police people but they are coming out of the cities, and you cannot expect someone coming straight out of the city to know: is it a dorper sheep, is it a merino sheep, is it a crossbred sheep, is it a Hereford? So that is what they are trying to do so they can actually talk the talk.

Mr McDONALD: Most saleyards have an induction process for people who are there a lot, whether it is agents, drovers, transporters et cetera. But in theory you could induct the activists when they come in as part of a block—I mean, that is not going to work either.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, we heard before there actually are not enough police to police this problem, because especially out in the country I know if we were to call the police, it could take them half an hour, three quarters of an hour, if they were on the spot, to get there, because you are that far away from where police

might be. They are busy with traffic, fines, people with drug issues and domestic violence. Do we need more police out in the country to handle these sorts of issues as well as being better trained?

Mr McDONALD: I think we need more police in that AGLO section, the rural crime, that actually get the training to understand this sort of stuff so that if they have got to come out to a farm or a saleyard—

Ms ISON: And theft as well. Theft is a big thing that is really not reported enough.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: It is the same as Queensland and New South Wales. They have got dedicated police officers to do that. Our AGLOs in Victoria are volunteers. So if they want to do a stock theft but then there is a rape down the street—of course, priorities. While in New South Wales and Queensland for the person that is looking after the stock theft, that is all that he has got to worry about. He does not have to go to the rape or whatever.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. So we need dedicated police.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Definitely.

Ms ISON: Definitely.

Mrs McARTHUR: So that is a recommendation you would make?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Definitely.

Ms ISON: Definitely.

Mr McDONALD: That is a separate issue, and we were supportive of that. We were involved when they introduced the AGLO system a number of years ago. That was a key weakness, that it depended on the motivation of the local copper about how much he got involved with it.

Ms BATH: I heard you say AGLO, and I thought that you might have made a mispronunciation. Can you just define what that means?

Mr CHRISTOPHER: Yes, what is that?

Ms BATH: Is it an acronym?

Mr McDONALD: It is an agricultural liaison officer.

Ms BATH: Thank you. It was not you mispronouncing it; it was me mishearing it.

Mr McDONALD: They are there to deal with rural crime.

Mrs McARTHUR: And these are volunteers, you say?

Mr McDONALD: No, they are police that in a rural area get nominated to be an AGLO, and part of their role is to sort of work on rural crime.

Mr CHRISTOPHER: I meant they volunteer within their job. They are still getting paid. They could be part of the road traffic, but they will help.

The CHAIR: If there are no further questions, 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 your proofreading. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.