

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Warragul—Wednesday, 21 August 2019

MEMBERS

Mr Nazih Elasmr—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Ms Sonja Terpstra

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Melina Bath

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Mary Wooldridge

Dr Catherine Cumming

WITNESS

Name Withheld.

The CHAIR: 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 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 thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. We invite you to do whatever you need to do, but please allow us some time to ask questions. Thank you very much.

WITNESS: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman and ladies and gentlemen of the Committee. [REDACTED]. I am the owner-operator of [REDACTED] here in Warragul, our own town where this Committee's hearings are being heard today. I would just like to thank you guys for the opportunity to speak at this public hearing.

Just a bit of brief background on our company, [REDACTED] is based here in Warragul and was established in 1946 by my father. We currently employ 150 staff and have a strong membership in the Australian Meat Industry Employees Union. Our permanent staff have something in the vicinity of 13½ years service. We supply meat to domestic markets all around Australia and regional Victoria, and we are also exporting to a number of tier 1 export countries in the last two or three years. We give back to the local community by way of sponsorship donations, which over the decades have amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars. We also supply local schools, university vets, herd improvement optometrists and other organisations with various organs for research and education purposes, all free of charge.

In recent years animal welfare has become a very important issue to the meat industry for a number of reasons due to public exposure, customers concerns and animal activism. As you are probably aware, we had our guest speaker this morning come down from Sydney. It was very good of him to come down—that is, Patrick Hutchinson. He is our CEO of AMIC. AMIC represents probably 95 per cent of meat processing and retailing smallgoods around Australia, so he is a very powerful man to have had here this morning. He spoke more specifically on industry issues, so I will not touch too much on them.

[REDACTED] is highly committed to the highest standard of animal welfare and humane treatment of livestock, and it continues to review its policies and procedures to maintain this. [REDACTED] receives a minimum of four unannounced audits per year from PrimeSafe, which is the Victorian meat authority, and we are very proud of the facilities we provide for our animals, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on shedding and protecting the stock from all weather conditions; also providing soft flooring, lucerne hay, access to fresh water and good airflow. For these reasons we get top results as far as our meat yields go—less bruising, which obviously gives our meat good colour, which results from our stress-free livestock, which really means a better financial result for us.

Even though we had had no direct experience with any animal activists until Dominion day on 8 April this year we have been notified by PrimeSafe and AMIC that we are at very high risk—a potential target—and that we are included on the Australian map. For this reason we ensured that we had extra measures in place to deal with the upcoming protest. We invited our local police to assess our facility and discuss potential risks. We had management meetings to develop a contingency plan, increased our security patrols and increased vigilance about suspicious people and vehicles. We installed new surveillance cameras and reviewed our vehicle access to our plant. All the above comes at a high monetary cost and obviously staff resources. It also creates a lot of stress to middle management staff.

On Monday, 8 April, at 7.00 am I received a phone call from AMIC's Melbourne office to warn me that the activists were on their way to my plant. We immediately notified the local police. Within 15 minutes we had the support of three police patrol cars and eight officers to protect my facility. To the credit of the police they maintained their presence throughout the day to ensure that [REDACTED] had processed their export orders and their domestic orders. Since that day [REDACTED], with the support of our local police and other agribusiness

people in this Baw Baw shire, have had regular discussions regarding ongoing activities from the animal activists.

I would like to just touch on the fact for this Committee, if they were not aware of it, that just in this region alone—a 120-kilometre radius from where we are now—there are 10 meatworks. It is the highest concentration of meatworks anywhere in Australia. It employs thousands of staff and it puts millions of dollars back into the local economy. For that reason we need a very strong law as a deterrent to stop these activists disrupting the day-to-day running of our plants and our businesses.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You just said at the end, ‘We need a strong law’. Can you elaborate more about how you think the Government should respond to all this?

WITNESS: Well, we heard the Gippy Goat farm owner prior to me, and I think there should be higher penalties. Again, I have got no problems with these guys protesting about what they feel is their right, but when they enter premises and disrupt production by locking themselves to equipment, by destroying day-to-day production—I was speaking to the police, and if an animal activist locks themselves to equipment, it is not the local police that has to cut them free; it has to be people from Melbourne, a special group from Melbourne. You could lose 8 hours production, so you could lose the whole day’s production, which is export orders, which is domestic orders. These people that go to this level should get fines that make it unattractive for them to keep doing it.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you very much for appearing today, [REDACTED]. I do not have too many questions for you. You mentioned Mr Hutchinson, and he somewhat agreed with a contention that I put forward. He agrees that mandatory and enforceable laws surrounding codes of practice and guidelines would be a good thing. Do you agree with him?

WITNESS: Yes, we are working through that, and it still has not been finalised at a national level. We have got as part of our licensing for export and domestic very strict guidelines on our QA program, which is audited by Aus-Meat, it is audited by SGS, which is our auditing company, and it is also audited by PrimeSafe on strict guidelines for animal welfare and animal welfare issues. But we need a national rollout that is consistent from all states.

Mr MEDDICK: I hear what you are saying about the amount of cameras that you have installed around the premises, and I completely get that. As part of that, you would have clearly seen in some other facilities that terrible acts of animal cruelty have actually been captured by undercover surveillance cameras, and that gives the opportunity then for mandatory CCTV on kill floors, for instance, in all slaughter areas so that someone who purports to be acting with all the best operations of the industry then can monitor that and make sure that these sorts of things are not happening, and if they do, they can take care of that. Would you support that?

WITNESS: Look, it is not compulsory, but I think it is a chance that it will be. Obviously we are audited by our customers, we are audited by our authorities and at this stage it is not legal, so we have not. We are looking at putting cameras in for that reason, to monitor our staff, but we are very, very cautious. I know the meat union are very cautious about, obviously, surveillance, their privacy—

Mr MEDDICK: But we are not talking about in change rooms and things like that.

WITNESS: No, and I understand that, but still it is a form of invasion of privacy. So we are looking at looking at doing that sort of stuff down the track.

Mr MEDDICK: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, [REDACTED], for coming here today. I am just not quite happy, I guess, with Mr Meddick’s verballing of the idea that the national guidelines should be mandatory or that cameras should be mandatory. We support guidelines and the protocols that are put in place now, and if a national approach could be rolled out, perhaps even better. I do not think that Mr Hutchinson actually agreed that they should be mandatory; he agreed there should be a national approach to the guidelines and protocols, but I did not hear the word ‘mandatory’. When I support a national approach to these sorts of aspects, I think they should be guidelines, and as you say, the market will sort out whether you actually comply with them or not. But I am

also interested in your response to the CCTV cameras in that if we are going to have them everywhere in the workplace, I wonder what the union's response to that is. And are they happy with all their staff being monitored by cameras all the time? Does that happen in every other workplace that you know of, that the workers are monitored by CCTV cameras? Do you have a response to that?

WITNESS: I do not think the union would be in favour of that. There is a certain privacy. But look, there are areas where cameras are valuable as far workplace accidents go—areas where there is non-compliance should definitely have cameras—but that is something that we would have to discuss with the union. But I know that they are not that keen on cameras being on plant. To what level they accept certain cameras in certain areas is something we have not discussed with them yet. Most of our cameras are external, they are not internal. I think we have got one internal camera, but most of them are external on the surrounds of the plant.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you have had to install and go to this extra expense to actually prevent invasion of your property?

WITNESS: Yes. That is one area, and theft is another, so it is not just solely because of animal activists. As far as we are concerned, to our knowledge we have not had any activists on our plant. I think that the day of 8 April they were heading to our place but having the police presence there stopped them. We were definitely told that we were a high-risk plant because we are 100 kilometres from Melbourne. The other plants that were targeted were all on that list and [REDACTED] was part of that list, so I think without the protection of the police that we could have had some disruption.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, [REDACTED], for coming along today. I just want to—this CCTV thing. I know that Mrs McArthur would not have been suggesting this, but I did not want this hearing to suddenly have the view that it was the trade union movement who were now being responsible for the provision or not of CCTV. Perhaps I will ask a question which might help clarify everybody's concern. I imagine that in your facility, like most businesses, there is a hierarchy that exists out on the shop floor and that the role of supervisors in the business is to ensure that all of the proper standards which have been established in your place of work are adhered to properly?

WITNESS: Yes, definitely.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much, [REDACTED], it is my understanding—and I will flag that we have had a conversation previously in relation to my wanting to understand what my local constituent operators were feeling in relation to this Inquiry. If I say that we have had a short conversation about a working group that has been set up in the Baw Baw shire with Baw Baw Shire Council I believe, the police and local processors and yourself to address a broader issue about trespass and theft and crime—how is that developing, and can you share that with the Committee? Because we have got to come up with good recommendations for good practices in the future, and I think that your working group sounded like it had great potential.

WITNESS: Yes, it was set up by our local police sergeant around the time of the activist day on the eighth. Since then I think there are about 10 businesses in the Baw Baw shire involved in this. They are dairy farmers, pig farmers, a rabbit grower and obviously the Gippy Goat farm, but also other facilities in this area that have a big impact and were also named that they were going to be targets. There is Lardner Park, which I am actually on the committee for out there as well. It is a big organisation with one of the biggest field days in Australia. They were going to be raided on one of the nights of the field days because of the locking up of animals and the animal farms that are being produced out there. They were another member of that group. My staff go and attend these; I do not actually attend them myself. They have met about three times. So they are very active and they are going to keep being very active and meet every two to three months.

Ms BATH: Could you maybe provide a bit of an overview as to some of the things that they look into or what they do as a model for our Committee—or is it fairly fluid?

WITNESS: There has been a bit of feedback through PrimeSafe. They feel that this is a very good idea that should be rolled out to the rest of the areas of Australia just to give everyone an update on what they need to do to protect themselves, what they need to do if there is an invasion—what procedures to go through, what legally they can do and what they should not do—just give everyone a briefing and a little bit of support. Some

of these operators are only one or two-man businesses so they feel as though they are a little bit lonely, so having some of the bigger companies involved and other meatworks involved gives them a little bit more security and obviously gives them a bit more help on how they should deal with some of the issues that can come from animal activists trespassing onto their properties and disrupting the day-to-day running of their businesses.

Ms BATH: One final, with your indulgence, thank you, Chair, what sort of a corporate citizen are you in your community? What do you do for your community?

WITNESS: What do I do?

Ms BATH: Or the business.

WITNESS: We are like every other local business. We give a lot back to the local community in donations and sponsorship and have done so for decades. As I said, we have got 150-odd staff that work, most of them locals living in the Baw Baw shire or surrounding shires, so we do our utmost to look after and share our wealth with our community. But as I mentioned here, we also give—and it amounts to a lot of money and a lot of time-consuming tasks on harvesting offal and organs for local schools and universities as far down as Bairnsdale. They come and collect these orders and we do not charge them, so you are talking thousands of dollars over a period of time. That is just what we do to give back to the local community and the local economy.

Mrs McARTHUR: [REDACTED], could you confirm that the businesses we are talking about, both farm producers and processors, are operating legal businesses? So they are legally entitled to farm animals and you are legally entitled to process them. Could you just confirm that, because it seems you are having to go to a lot of effort to ensure that you can keep operating and farmers can operate safely but you are actually operating legal businesses?

WITNESS: I have been in the industry all my life, 45 years, from a retailer right through to where we are now. We spend millions a year making sure that we comply with the pretty strict regulatory requirements to produce meat obviously for the domestic market but also the export market. We provide a service to all farmers in the region for their own private processing for their own freezers. We provide a service of contract processing for butchers all over Australia, and a big market of ours is in Sydney. We put a lot of meat into Sydney. And that comes at a cost; it comes with a layer of red tape. It is a very high turnover business but with very small margins. So that is what we do. This area alone 10 years ago probably had, just in the immediate area, 15 little meatworks and slaughterhouses. There are now only two or three domestic abattoirs or slaughterhouses left, but in the bigger picture, as I said, if you take in the export abattoirs, there are probably 10 in this area from the Murray right through to Dandenong that employ a lot of staff and a lot of families come through that business.

The CHAIR: Thank you. 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 time you will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. At the same time I would like to thank Mr Blackwood for attending, and everyone in the gallery and the media. I thank the Hansard staff and my colleagues. That is the end of the public hearing.

Committee adjourned.