

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture**

Melbourne—Monday, 23 September 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr Nazih Elasmari—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

**WITNESSES**

Mr David Jochinke, President, and

Mr Stephen Sheridan, CEO, Victorian Farmers Federation; and

Mr Paul Mumford, President, United Dairyfarmers of Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, first of all. 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 state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask you questions. Welcome.

**Mr JOCHINKE:** My name is David Jochinke. I am the President of the Victorian Farmers Federation, third-generation farmer and I farm near Horsham, Victoria.

**Mr MUMFORD:** My name is Paul Mumford. I am the President of the United Dairyfarmers of Victoria. I am also a farmer, a third-generation farmer, in South Gippsland here in Victoria.

**Mr SHERIDAN:** Stephen Sheridan, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Farmers Federation, and not a farmer.

**Mr JOCHINKE:** We would like to make a few opening remarks if that is okay. Our commitment to producing the best quality food and fibre is what drives us every single day, and ultimately it drives the sustainability of our industry. I think the Victorian community is grateful to our farmers who put food on our plates and clothes on our backs, and as farmers we are also grateful to the community that freely chooses to buy our produce, supporting our industry and supporting our way of life. Farmers are eternally optimistic and driven by a sense of hope—a sense of hope that we can continue to carry on, improving our traditions of feeding our own community, feeding the world, driving the nation's economic prosperity and looking after our environment. These are traditions and the legacies that we hope to pass on to our children and to future generations.

But for many farmers the hopes are continually being dashed by the rise of animal activists trespassing and invading their farms, and it is not just a place of work but also our homes. Be under no doubt: family farms are our homes as well. It is our land: not just where we do it but how we do it. Our land is interconnected with who we are: into our memories, into our future and also our hopes for growing a better future for us and our families. That is why we say that a farm invasion is just the same thing as a home invasion. It is so bitterly disappointing that we are having a respectful discussion about animal welfare and then we are forced to focus on issues, such as farmers and our families. It is because a group of what we call and describe as extremist activists are constantly threatening our homes and our way of lives.

The key issue being dealt with by this Inquiry is to understand the impact of animal activists who trespass onto farms and what effect they are having on our farmers and their families. You have already heard from some of the farmers who have shown bravery in speaking to you and have read their submissions to you, and what we have heard is the mental anguish that is being forced on them because they think that potentially they will be on the next hit list. That is why the VFF is calling on the Parliament to fix our broken legal system that does nothing to punish or deter farm home invaders. That is why we call for penalties similar to other states that would see a \$1000 on-the-spot fine, a \$220 000 fine for individuals and \$400 000 fines for organisations. The VFF also calls for the banning of activists using crowdfunding websites and services to help them pay fines and legal representation. Additionally, directors of corporations are responsible for causing farm trespasses should be held liable, mitigating the ability for directors to protect themselves with the corporate entity.

In what world would we accept 70 people that can forcefully enter a property, such as a farm, intimidate and threaten the owners and staff and then remove property from that location? Would we accept this if it was a nursing home, a hospital or a school, a restaurant or the office towers that we are surrounded by, or even by this very building, the Parliament? Would we accept this happening in your home? My members are feeling

completely abandoned by the current process in place to protect their families and their homes. Whilst this Inquiry has been repeatedly told by activists that trespassing laws are adequate, the reality is that we say otherwise. By their own admission activists wilfully defy the law without fear of consequence. They continue to invade family farms and repeatedly attack the same farm over a series of weeks.

Quite frankly, if there is not anything that comes forward that fills that void and actually stands up for farmers, there is a major concern that those farmers will lose confidence in what they do and how they do it. They are losing confidence to invest and losing confidence to encourage their families to come home and take on the operation that they have built up. Just think of the decimating impact that would have on regional communities that you represent. Having heard many shocking stories from our farming families—they have been harassed by activists—I hope this parliamentary Inquiry will have no doubt in the collective minds of its members that we need tougher laws to protect our farming families, protect the homes and deter invaders.

**Mr MUMFORD:** Thank you, Committee. Thank you, DJ. The dairy industry is an extremely diverse one: people from different backgrounds, people who farm differently, people who employ large workforces, those who choose to do it alone and people who milk different breeds of cattle. But the one thing that has always been at the heart of the dairy industry is the importance of family. Like many dairy farmers, I now operate a multigeneration farm. The land on which my farm is on is more than just a business; it is my home. It was my father's home, it was my mother's home and now it is my wife's and children's home. Farmers bust their backs from before the sun comes up to long after it goes down not just to make a profit but for the pure joy of being able to work with the animals we love, being outdoors, working with stock—and they love providing an essential community for the community. Dairy farmers choose to enter the industry because it is the thing they love and it helps them provide for those who they care dearly about—their families. They do all this yet are made to feel unsafe in their homes due to the now prevalent threat of invasion and trespass. Farming families are made to feel intimidated and unsafe in their homes and places of work due to the persecution by a minority that believe their lawful business is somehow immoral.

Dairy farmers are also integral for the economic respect for local communities. As this is an economic inquiry, I will touch briefly on what dairy contributes to the Victorian dairy economy. The Australian dairy industry is currently valued at \$14 billion, with 65 per cent of this value coming from Victoria. That equates to around \$9.1 billion. Dairy is also a major employer in regional communities, both on farm and in the processing facilities, employing over 25 000 people who help economic growth and stimulus for regional and rural communities. Dairy is a unique industry because it is the only agriculture industry where people are required twice a day, 365 days a year, meaning it provides a constant stream of employment for rural communities.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right here in Australia. Feeling safe in our own homes is also a fundamental right. As the United Dairyfarmers of Victoria President, I represent some 3500 farmers and dairy farming families—families that now live in fear because their way of life has been seen as unacceptable to a small minority of people. As previously stated, freedom of expression is a fundamental right. However, invading a farm, trespassing and treating law-abiding families like criminals in their own homes is not right and is in fact illegal. The actions of those who trespass and break biosecurity legislation unlawfully are yet to be prosecuted adequately by our legal system. The argument has been made that the current penalties for trespassing onto farms act as an adequate deterrent for those who wish to break the law. This is clearly a falsity as we have seen an increase in farm trespass and invasion, which puts the economic viability of our industry and our communities at risk. As such, this Inquiry should make the recommendation that the penalty of \$1000 on-the-spot fines be put in place to act as a deterrent, with larger fines of up to \$220 000 for individuals and \$400 000 for organisations.

These penalties are not about denying industry transparency, which has been claimed by certain parties. These penalties are to deter those who consider breaking the law from doing so and allowing people to feel safe. Farming families need to be protected, and I feel the increased penalties will ensure that farmers, their staff and their families are safe at work and in their homes.

**The CHAIR:** Stephen, are you okay?

**Mr SHERIDAN:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Chair. Firstly, I would to thank the Government and the Committee members for holding this Inquiry on such an important issue. Unlike my colleagues here, who are farmers, I

would like to give a slightly different perspective of someone living and working in Melbourne with a young family and work colleagues, but someone who also works regularly with farmers and the farming community. In Melbourne we as Victorians sit here and we enjoy and take for granted a number of rights and privileges, such as the right to free speech but also the privilege of enjoying food produced to some of the highest standards and providence in the world. Melbourne is renowned as the culinary capital. We love our brunches, lunches and dinners from across all walks of life, across all cuisines, and we celebrate them accordingly on a regular basis. We enjoy a vast array of clean, fresh food and, importantly, we exercise our individual choice in what we choose to enjoy and consume. However, the Victorian Farmers Federation, and myself personally, believe the majority of Melburnians do not support individuals imposing their personal preferences and opinions on others through illegal behaviour.

Australians, as Paul alluded to, take for granted the fundamental and legal right to feel safe in our own homes. We expect and have the legal right and obligation to ensure a safe workplace, free from threatening behaviour, intimidation, harassment and bullying. We expect illegal behaviour such as breaking and entering, theft and vandalism to be penalised. So while we sit here in Melbourne comfortable, farmers are being denied this fundamental and legal right to feel safe in their own homes and workplaces. They are not free from threatening behaviour, intimidation, harassment and bullying. Why is home invasion in Melbourne considered abhorrent in the city yet appears to be accepted for farmers and their families? Why is it that workplace intimidation, harassment and bullying are considered culturally and legally unacceptable, with strong legal penalties introduced within Victoria, yet we are sitting here implicitly accepting this culture of workplace harassment of farmers, their families and employees? This tacit support of farm invasions is completely unacceptable, and it is a double standard.

We have heard extreme activists feel compelled by what I would argue are their minority beliefs. This does not in any way justify them trampling the fundamental rights and laws of broader society. Ironically they are the same rights the activists themselves would take for granted. Farming is a stressful and difficult enough environment with drought; fires; floods; poor infrastructure, such as energy and connectivity; and poor health support services all impacting on farmers' mental health and wellbeing. Farm invasions only serve to exacerbate farmers', their families' and their employees' sense of isolation, stress and intimidation, further impacting their health and wellbeing. We believe the majority of Victorians, if they were aware of what was actually going on out in regional Victoria and regional Australia, would not tolerate this behaviour. We ask the Committee and the Government to support their farm community, who they and all Victorians rely on for their fresh food and produce, and to increase penalties for farm trespassers and invasion in line with other states. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I am going to ask Mr Meddick to ask a question, because he has to leave earlier, but just on your last remark, you said farmers come to you because they feel stressed. What advice do you give them when they come to you and say, 'Someone is stressing me'? Or what advice does the federation give them?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** From the very start, when we started to see an increase in this occurring, we encouraged them first of all to remain calm. They are not the police. They are not there to take any action that could harm or affect anyone else, because ultimately no-one is above the law. So to prepare—and when I say the word 'prepare', there have been many people who have been concerned that they could be targeted due to them being on different websites or even having their names circulated—they should take protective action to the extent even where I know personally of a family that will not remain on their farm if the husband is not there. So when I hear stories of that much stress and that much angst, we do encourage them to remain calm and to use their phone to not only ring the police but then also take footage and hopefully evidence that could be used later, because at the end of the day nobody is above the law. There is no cavalry around the corner that will come and, be it physically, prevent this from happening. That is where we need to have deterrence. That is where we need to have laws to make sure that there are consequences for people's actions. For our side of it, we have tried to remain calm through this process and have encouraged our members to remain calm because, once again, we do not want anything to escalate.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, all three of you, for presenting here this afternoon and for your submissions to this Inquiry, and I thank you also for hearing me first because I do have to get on the road. I just wanted to ask you first a couple of questions, David, very quickly and then you, Paul. You spoke just before about people coming onto farms and threatening the owners of these farms. I have never heard of—in none of the testimony that has been given to us here—any unauthorised farm access where the people involved have actually threatened, either physically or verbally, any of the farmers. Have you got any proof that that has actually happened?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** I feel that when we speak about threatening and we speak about how somebody feels, that cannot be just taken as a verbal threat or a physical threat. It can be by sheer weight of numbers. It can be the fact of the clothing that they wear. It can be by the fact of the words that they say at the time. So when we talk about threat, it is not just necessarily the direct impact or physical or be it the way that somebody may approach somebody in an aggressive manner. We also talk about it in the sense of numbers, the sense of location and the sense of who they actually come across—be it not senior management; it can be staff, it can be members of the family—that are the first people who have that interaction. Once again I will pick the number 70. If people come towards you with a clear intent not to listen to a word you have to say, with a clear intent to come on the premises without invitation, to say that you would not feel threatened or feel that you were being violated would be a gross underestimation of how those people feel, and that is what has been explained to me.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Well, thank you for the clarification, because that is not what you actually said. It was implied that they had actually come onto the farm and made threats. So I thank you for the clarification. You also stated that you wanted farmers to be treated equally under the law. Both of you feel that farmers are not being treated equally under the law. It is a basic tenet of democracy in Victoria and indeed across Australia and in democracies around the world that everyone is treated equally under the law. We have quite severe penalties for trespass, be they here in the city or be they out on a farm. The penalties are quite severe. So what you are actually talking about here is not the penalties themselves, but you have a problem with the way the judiciary is handing down a penalty. That is really where this lies, because every single person in this room would have an expectation that should they be in a situation, they should be treated equally under the law—that the law is not stacked or weighted against them in any way, shape or form for any reason. That is a basic tenet of democracy, so I would contend that that perhaps is where the problem lies. We have heard testimony about people being dissatisfied with certain penalties handed down by the judiciary, and that is what the reference of the Inquiry is—to whether the law is sufficient. Well, we have had lawyers and everyone sit here and say the laws are actually quite sufficient—and we have had this from farmers as well—and that there is just a problem, there is just this thing that magistrates are not necessarily handing down a penalty that they feel is sufficient.

So then if I can just go to you, Paul, for a question, you stated that it is a minority of people that seem to have a problem with what is going on. Well, there is a Federal Government report that actually states that over 90 per cent of people in the community have concerns about animal cruelty in agriculture. So that is hardly a small percentage, is it? And you spoke about how much this is worth—how much dairy is worth, for instance—but no matter how much money an industry is worth, isn't it true that it should not be above scrutiny and it should not be above community standards so that it can operate in a complete vacuum?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Can I just address the concerns as I see them. First of all, we never said that there would be physical threats to people. However, once again, the threat and the feelings of people, my members, are that there have been chants at them. They feel aggression, because if you ask somebody on your own property to leave that property and they do not, I consider that threatening, and especially in numbers. So I will stand here, absolutely, to make that point clear—that that is a threat; that is a personal threat. When people come to your property, that you rightfully own and operate, and they do not respect that as a course of action—that they do not abide by you. Second—

**Mr SHERIDAN:** Can I just also cite that we have heard examples—I am not sure if they have been presented to the Committee—of activists entering farm premises wearing balaclavas. If you have a number of individuals show up to your premises or your home, your place of business, and get out wearing balaclavas—or not—or show up in the middle of the night, that can be interpreted, and most sane people would interpret it, as threatening behaviour. If you are woken up in the middle of the night by someone entering your property or breaking into your property, the interpretation is on the beholder. It is not whether someone has waved a

weapon around or not. That is certainly the way we would see it. It is certainly the way those farmers perceive it—as threatening behaviour. And I think most individuals in Melbourne, if someone broke into their property, would perceive that as threatening behaviour.

**Mr MUMFORD:** Thank you for those questions. Can I just ask you to readdress those questions? Thank you, Committee member.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Just repeat them?

**Mr MUMFORD:** Yes, please, particularly around the dairy.

**The CHAIR:** Repeat them quickly, please—the questions.

**Mr MEDDICK:** You stated that there was a very small minority who were involved in this or had concerns. The Federal Government report stated—it was only, I think, about last year—that 90 per cent of all Australians have a problem with and concerns about animal cruelty in animal agriculture. I just wanted to clarify that point. I was asking you: no matter how much an industry is worth—and you stated the figures—should it be above scrutiny? Because the majority of these on-farm incursions are not about farm invasions per se, they are about planting cameras.

**Mr FINN:** Andy, is this a second-reading speech?

**The CHAIR:** I know you have got to leave early, but we have got to ask the questions.

**Mr MUMFORD:** Can I just reply? We self-scrutinise. There is a whole system of frameworks, within any industry, of checks and balances, from government to industry bodies to R, D and E research companies to farmers. They all scrutinise themselves for the benefit of their own animals and the betterment of their industry. So I believe what you are talking about, perhaps, is community awareness, which is completely different to animal activists.

**Mr FINN:** I have to say that I am the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of dairy farmers. In fact my father was a foundation member of the UDV and was very active in the VFU many years ago now, so I can relate very much, particularly to what Paul has said about the lifestyle that attracts dairy farmers and the attitudes that they hold. I have seen, over many years, the extreme difficulties that farmers—not just dairy farmers but other farmers—have suffered as a result of droughts and fires and a whole range of low prices and you name it. And I have to say as far as I am concerned the last thing they need is some sort of threat over their homes, their families, in the way that we are seeing at the moment.

I have to ask—and I tried to sort of work on the previous witness on this but did not get very far at all—what is the attitude of the police towards this? Obviously you must have had contact with Victoria Police. What is their attitude towards this sort of activity?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Can I just say that we have actually been very fortunate today to ask that question because the police have recognised that there is an issue with farm crime, and today they have actually announced that they are introducing an inspector of police around farm crime. Now, that should demonstrate that this is a serious issue that is actually getting worse across the state and they would like to help address that on the ground to the extent that they are making it a specific farm task force, turning the AGLOs into farm crime liaison officers. And as a part of that, that actually, in a sense, demonstrates (a) how serious they are but also (b) that something had to change. And something is hopefully going to change.

We continue to call for an independent farm crime squad that deals not only with farm invasions, such as the ones we are talking about, but also farm crime. So first of all, yes, all of our engagements with the police have been positive. Yes, it has also been recognised that more resources need to be included, and we have seen that today with the appointment of the inspector. But more so, this does not actually address the issue of deterrence. It is another way that we can have our voices heard, but the reality is that if they do not have the tools at their disposal, they can only do the best that they currently are doing.

**Mr FINN:** Well, I did raise an issue with the Superintendent regarding the matter of conspiracy, and I do not think anybody seriously is suggesting that just happens; this is clearly an organised campaign of intimidation—and almost terror, in its own way. What can the Government do to prevent this organisation—this conspiracy, if you will—from occurring?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Well, be it from the fact that yes, people do feel like they are being confronted on their own property. With the complete rights and respect they should be treated with, they feel like they are not being heard. Albeit that there is a conversation that goes around people's dietary beliefs, that should not detract from the fact that there is a law that is being broken. If there is no consequence for that law being broken, there is one of two things happening. First of all, the consequence is not severe enough to actually become a deterrent. Secondly, if there is a deterrent, it is not being utilised. We believe that the first is more the case here. We believe in making it very clear that this is unacceptable behaviour. There are pathways for people to protest, to make their own beliefs heard, let alone if they have an issue with a practice and they would like to have it investigated. There are also pathways there, and they can use those. But more so, if we cannot ensure that the laws are taken seriously by making sure they are in an adequate position to effect enforcement or effect an outcome, we will be no better off in this position in future years.

**Mr SHERIDAN:** If I may just add to that and say the lack of an appropriate penalty almost acts as a bit of a tacit approval in itself. So you can end up with the perverse outcome, I think, where you have created a forum, in effect, for those activists to then promote their cause. Rather than being a disincentive it almost becomes an incentive to create the platform to promote the endgame. So the need for the penalties is clear as a disincentive. I think further to that, as a preventative, of course, you have talked about organisation. We need to look at those organisational structures that are actually promoting this sort of activity, such as the Animals Australia website. Sorry, the Aussie farmers website.

**Mr FINN:** Just one more, if I may, very quickly. What happens to farms as a business if farmers do not look after their animals?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** I will let Paul elaborate on this, but healthy animals, animals that are looked after with good stewardship, are the most productive animals. When I say 'productive', that means that not only have they been looked after with the right stewardship, but any description or even classification in our codes of conduct are well and truly met and actually exceeded. You will find that especially in tough times people will put their animals or the welfare of their animals even above themselves. So it is taken extremely seriously.

**Mr MUMFORD:** Totally agree, David. If we do not look after our animals, then they fall into poor nutrition, poor health and ultimately animal welfare issues. We do not do that. For our own interest we are there to look after our animals, and in their reward they will give us milk or meat or whatever it may be. But we have got to be quite clear that we need them as much as they need us.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** Thank you all for coming in today and for giving your evidence. Just a couple of questions, if I can. I just wanted to refer to page 7 of the Agriculture Victoria submission. You may not have read it but I will just quote some statistics. I just wanted to get your views on this. This is on page 7 of their report:

Victoria Police have advised that there has been 11 instances of protest and 11 instances of trespass relating to animal activism reported to Victoria Police over the 12 months (from May 2018 to May 2019).

Then it goes on to say:

No reports of violence or damage to property from uninvited entry to farms or related businesses were made to Victoria Police during this time.

Do you think there is a problem with reporting and under-reporting of these situations? I noted your earlier response, I think, David, where you were saying that you encourage your members or people who are farm owners to use their phone and contact the police. But based on those statistics it does not seem that it is a big problem when there are 11 instances of trespass, for example. So can you just tell us a bit more about whether you think there is a problem around reporting and under-reporting? This seems to say that it is not such a big problem, based on those stats.

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Sorry, if we had 11 schools invaded or 11 hospitals or 11 nursing homes, I would sincerely hope that—

**Ms TERPSTRA:** That is not the question I asked you, sorry.

**Mr JOCHINKE:** I am trying to put some context in.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** Could I just direct you back to the question: do you think there is a problem with under-reporting?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** I would say that, yes, there is a problem with reporting, and that is, one, a resource issue. Two, I believe that one incidence is too much. One is too much, so 11 is well and truly over a threshold. But more so it is the consequence of allowing this to continue. If we say that 11 is okay, is 50 okay? Is 100 okay? Where is the line? For us, quite simply, one is too much.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** Just one other question. I think, Paul, in your submission you seemed to be implying that there should be more weight given to the fact that for people on farms it is a business, but it is also their home. Do you think a farm should be treated any differently to any other home? For example, if someone broke into my home should I not be as equally concerned as someone on a farm? I am just trying to understand. Are you trying to suggest that farms should be treated differently to other homes when someone breaks in or trespasses? I just do not understand.

**Mr MUMFORD:** My home is my home, as you see your home is your home. My home has a beautiful view over the land with my cows walking on it, my milking cows walking on it. That is my home.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** So should my home be treated differently to your home in the eyes of the law?

**Mr MUMFORD:** No, I did not say that.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** I am asking you the question, though. Should my home be treated differently to your home in the eyes of the law?

**Mr MUMFORD:** I do not see the point.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** I am just asking you a question. Should it be treated differently or not?

**Mr MUMFORD:** My home is my home. That is what I know.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** Yes or no?

**The CHAIR:** What she meant is her home is equal to your home.

**Mr MUMFORD:** That is right. If somebody breaks into your—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** Thank you.

**Ms BATH:** I feel like you are under quite a severe interrogation this afternoon, gentlemen. Thank you for your presentation. We heard from Superintendent Peter Greaney, and I sort of jotted down his words that over recent times there has been an escalation of animal activist activity. That was the synopsis of his words. My concern is in relation to the mental health of the farming community. I attest to your comments prior that when I was at Lardner field day standing at a booth having a chat to people, we had people saying, 'In the past people would drive up the driveway and we never minded who they were. We knew they were one of a few people—the vet, the family, the religious groups coming to sell their wares—and now we seriously have those concerns'. What does the Government need to do to protect people in terms of supporting farming communities' mental health with respect to this issue?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Well, quite simply, it is to take it seriously. To take the fact—and it is an absolute fact—that if this is allowed to continue, if this is to become a social norm, that the fabric of our communities, especially our rural ones, will absolutely lose confidence and disintegrate. We need you, the people who we entrust, the people who are responsible for not only our safety but the wellbeing of the whole state, to actually recognise that this is a fair dinkum, real issue. There would not be a week that goes by where I do not have multiple phone calls about how people feel, what they should be doing, what can they do about either protecting themselves or protecting their families. The concern is that not only are we becoming less populated in regional areas and help is further away than it has ever been, but what can they do about even some basic infrastructure to help if they are feeling threatened? What should they be putting into place?

That is not the state that I want to grow up and live in. I do not even know why we should be having to lock our doors, but that is the reality. We now have to lock down everything to the extent now that we have got properties over vast acres and we cannot be in every corner in every place. That is why we need laws and penalties if you break those laws to be taken seriously so if there are people who offend, they are actually dealt with in a manner that sends a message to everyone that this is unacceptable.

**Ms BATH:** Thank you, David. There are some on this Committee that would say that the penalties are sufficient, they just need to be enforced and it is the judiciary system that is enabling this to happen. But in the case of an ear tag removal and a biosecurity breach there was no minimum penalty, i.e. the minimum penalty that was issued was \$1. Can you speak to that issue?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** We talk about electronic ear tags, especially in sheep or even goats. This is a \$21 million investment by the industry to make sure that we have got biosecurity in check. For people who may not be aware, biosecurity is extremely serious. We saw in the UK that one animal caused the whole of the UK to be shut down with foot-and-mouth disease. We are currently seeing African swine fever march over Asia and the absolutely detrimental effect that that is having. So when we hear about people breaking such laws or flouting such laws and putting our farms and our livelihoods and our communities and even the whole of rural and regional Victoria under threat, that disgusts me.

I would like to see that once again there should be minimum penalties for breaking such laws. As a producer, if I do not produce my certified paperwork, I do get smacked. I can get fined. I can have my property identification number revoked. I can actually be excluded from the industry if I break the rules. The rules are there to protect everyone but we need people to take them seriously, and for that to occur, when somebody breaks the laws, they have to be made an example of and be treated appropriately.

**Mr MUMFORD:** Can I just add, Chair, in the dairy industry it is \$9.1 billion of economic growth here in Victoria. Can we afford not to make biosecurity front and centre in any form of standards that we take forward?

**Mr BARTON:** Throughout these hearings there has been a repeated message that farming families are afraid to be on their farms. We certainly heard a young farmer scared to be on her farm now. Can you give us a bit more of what you are being told about people actually leaving the farm?

**Mr MUMFORD:** If I may start, I refer back to a previous comment that historically farmers were more than happy to open their front door when a car came down their driveway. It might have been perhaps a local postie, it might have been perhaps the Seventh-day Adventists or whoever it might have been—a representative selling their wares. That safety has now gone for our members. They no longer feel safe. They question, who is this? What have I done? What is wrong? It has changed forever because of these actions.

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Can I just add, and I will be brief, the hypersensitive response to this has actually changed our community already. It has changed how some social patterns occur, be it that people do not have faith that they can be alone on their properties and people do not have faith that they can leave their partner and their children alone. So it has had a direct effect to the extent where until some gravity changes and this can be taken seriously, that is still a scar or ripple that I am seeing and I hear in all my conversations.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, gentlemen, for coming today. Just in case you do not know, we had the animal activists present on a previous occasion here and I think every single one of them agreed and confirmed that the actual agenda was to end animal meat production in this state. That seems to be the agreed agenda

worldwide and across the nation. So this is really not about animal welfare, this is about ending the animal production industry. You have given us the figures of what that means to the Victorian economy and what that means to the Australian economy and it is extremely serious.

So we had previously just today the law institute representative tell us that this is about animal welfare and to solve this problem we need to have CCTV cameras on every farm. I think there are 22 000 farms in Victoria. When questioned about where you would have them—on every paddock, every fence, every shed, who is going to pay for it and who is going to monitor it—that does not seem to come into the parameters. But I just wonder if you would like to comment on the fact and what would be the impact of closing down the Victorian animal production industry to the economy here, and also how would you implement the rollout of CCTV cameras on every farm and animal production premises in this state?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** First of all, and this is the part that really grinds my gears, there is an assertion that we are criminals and we are doing something wrong. That is absolutely absurd. I am absolutely flabbergasted that somebody of that profession and ilk would take the attitude that you are guilty until proven innocent and the fact of the impracticality of such a suggestion that it would be a solution. I really struggle that that should be a solution. However, I will also say that we have to make sure that as far as the agriculture community goes, we are open to having conversations, that we are open to giving assurances. But to treat us in such a manner is not only disrespectful in its absurdity, but then also for me as a citizen I would find that a complete disrespect to not only my trade but to my profession and even my community.

**The CHAIR:** Stephen, do you want to add anything to it?

**Mr SHERIDAN:** I think David got the crux of it there. I was going to just allude to, as David did, why are we assuming that farmers are doing something wrong. How many business places are there across the entirety of Victoria and are we going to impose the same constraints on those businesses and ensure that they all, in every workplace, have CCTV and then—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Including the law institute, we thought.

**Mr SHERIDAN:** Including the law institute—and then the privacy considerations and everything else that would arise on top of that.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Would you care to comment on the economic impact issue?

**Mr SHERIDAN:** And of course the cost was what I was going to follow on from that. The cost of actually doing something, I would hate to think. It would be prohibitive, and how you could roll that out across broad-spectrum farming enterprises, I just—

**Ms BATH:** Who would check the checkers?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** I do not even know how they get an internet connection as well.

**Mr QUILTY:** Bev just stole my CCTV question. We heard before from Professor Paul Hemsworth that there is no systemic problem with animal welfare in Victoria so any incidents that happen are isolated ones. If you were aware of a farmer with bad practices, would you report it?

**Mr SHERIDAN:** Yes, I think the industry would and should. We have our own independent regulators. We have a chief veterinary health officer, we have legislation, we have regulation and we have codes of practice. Victoria, if not Australia, is leading the way in ensuring we have the highest quality and hygiene standards of food production in the world. It goes to my opening statements. We enjoy that, and one of the great privileges of living in a city like Melbourne and the state of Victoria is the provenance of our food.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Chair, just one last thing. On that point, this assertion that Victorian farmers are cruel, is that having an impact on how we deal with international markets and even domestic markets given this assertion that all farmers are cruel to animals?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** We are one of the world's leading countries in animal welfare practices. Be it there might be people who do not agree with live exports, how I raise my livestock and what I do with my livestock, the fact of the matter is we are the world leaders. We are leading in so many avenues and areas that that gives us the ability to have such discussions like we are today, not the fundamental fact of how safe our food is. We are one of the most regulated countries dealing with agriculture in the world, and so when there are assertions of be it crime, be it misconduct, be it whatever you would like to classify it as, we are one of the preferred suppliers because we do not do that. Even more so, if this was systemic, if this cruelty was happening in every corner of every farm and every property, the media would be on it like a rash. Not only that, I would also suggest that the industry itself would be wanting to shut it down, because we realise that if we are in the business of producing food, if we cannot sell food, if we cannot satisfy customers' choice—because at the end of the day, we are talking about choice here as much as anything else—we would not be able to fulfil that duty. But more so, today we seem to be focusing on the issue of welfare when the reality is the welfare of farmers is not the one that we are spending most of our time on. For me, that is my biggest concern.

**The CHAIR:** If there are no further questions, on behalf of the—did I miss anything? Paul?

**Mr MUMFORD:** I was just going to say to the Committee that Victoria exports 40 per cent of its dairy products. It is imperative that we look at exactly what the consumers want and the parameters they want for their product. We are constantly working at all levels of government and industry, coming up with the appropriate policies or procedures.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Could David just comment on the mental health issue affecting farmers in rural communities and rural people at the moment?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** I lived through the millennium drought. Actually I came home when I was 18. But when I was a younger apprentice—that was a few years ago, thanks, Paul—I saw what stress and duress during the 1982 drought was, what animal standards were then and what we have got today. When we talk about stress, it can go hand in glove with drought. We can talk about financial downturns in different sectors or even the fact that in many areas of the state we do feel isolated and alone because of our infrastructure and our ability to access simple things like a doctor—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Or a policeman.

**Mr JOCHINKE:** or a policeman. We are effectively our own fire brigade. We do feel like we are forgotten, and even today our discussion is around making sure that we are back on the map and put in a place where we are respected and looked after. I do not think that is too much to ask for. So the stress levels are high. The feelings of not being heard are extremely high. There is not a community out there that would say that they are satisfied. But the individual impact that it has on farmers, on the way we do our business and the confidence for us to proceed is completely undermined if we do not get support. For me, once again, this discussion is about supporting farmers.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** And the level of farm suicide?

**Mr JOCHINKE:** Well, it is a serious issue. I do not think there is a person in a rural community that has not been touched by it—in fact, all too often. There are many reasons for it, and it is really serious because it tears communities and people apart. But if there is anything that contributes to it, if there are aspects that we should be addressing, it is about making sure that we are giving people confidence, and that confidence is about the future and about their concerns being heard. It is something that I believe is escalating, and half the time it is just people wanting to feel appreciated and respected.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time—extra time, actually—and for your contribution. You will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. At the same time I would like to thank everyone in the gallery. I would like to thank the staff, Hansard, and my colleagues. The hearing is closed.

**Committee adjourned.**