

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Warrnambool—Tuesday, 17 September 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

**WITNESSES**

Cr Daniel Meade, Deputy Mayor,

Cr Jim Doukas, and

Cr Ian Smith, Moyne Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon and 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. My understanding is that you all represent one council, correct?

**Cr DOUKAS:** Yes, the Moyne Shire.

**The CHAIR:** So one of you will say which council it is, or which shire it is, and the rest will say their names, okay? And allow us some time to ask you questions, please.

**Cr MEADE:** First of all thanks, Chair and Committee, for allowing us to be a late addition to speak. We did make a written submission to the Inquiry, so we thank you for the opportunity to speak here today in Warrnambool. I am Cr Daniel Meade from the Moyne Shire. Our submission is only short, so I will remind you of that in case you have not got it in front of you. The council is pleased to have the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry which is considering reporting on the effectiveness of legislation and other measures to prevent and deter activities by unauthorised persons on agricultural and associated industries.

Agriculture is vital to our country's food production—a huge role in the economy and a major employer for the Moyne shire. The annual output from the agricultural sector in Moyne shire alone is \$618 million, and the sector supports nearly 3500 full-time jobs. Threats to the sustainability and security of this sector cannot be tolerated, and voluntary acts that create such threats should be penalised strongly by law.

Unauthorised access to private farmland creates an enormous biosecurity risk. Biosecurity has played a critical role in reducing risk and in shaping the reputation of our nation as a green and clean food producer and exporter. Animal activists pose a very real threat to introducing contamination and disease to intensive and specialised farming operations and should be strongly penalised for any unauthorised activity on Victorian and Moyne farms. The recent court penalty of \$1 does not reflect the serious risk that such illegal activity presents. Legislation should provide strong penalties for perpetrators of such activity who threaten the integrity of our biosecurity and tarnish our international reputation.

Animal activists have entered private farming properties without permission. This amounts to trespass and should be dealt with according to law. At differing times many farmers experience high stress levels due to seasonal and economic conditions. The prospect of a farmer responding aggressively to unauthorised access by animal activists is real and could result in serious personal injury. On-the-spot fines of \$1000, as introduced in New South Wales, would seem to be an appropriate starting measure, together with substantial court fines for such trespassers.

Farmers are working diligently to improve on-farm safety, particularly for their workers and farm visitors. However, farms do by their nature present numerous risks when animals, machinery and equipment are involved. Animal activists arriving illegally on the farms open up the possibility for health and safety to be compromised and for injuries to occur. Again, strong penalties need to be established and enforced to deter such behaviour.

It is clear to council that the current deterrents for unauthorised farm access by animal activists are not effective. The State Government needs to introduce legislative powers that apply strong penalties to act as a stronger deterrent to animal activists who illegally enter private farms and create a range of risks, including biosecurity, workplace health and safety, health and wellbeing, trespass and stock theft. Council thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make the submission and speak today.

There are just a couple of things I would like to add to that submission before I invite fellow councillors to speak. As mentioned, almost 50 per cent of those that work in Moyne work directly in agriculture or agriculture manufacturing. This 50 per cent includes mums and dads and daughters and sons working on farm, producing quality food to feed the masses of Melbourne. And, I might add, in the dairy sector about 80 per cent of our local produce is actually exported. This 50 per cent includes those based in our rural towns, providing value services to the farm gate, like stock agents, merchandise stores, rural ag contractors, artificial breeders, agronomists, nutritionists, bankers et cetera. This 50 per cent of the people directly employed in Moyne's ag sector—the families of these employees—are those making the slices and cut lunches for the local community groups: Lions clubs, footy and netball clubs, bowls clubs, schools, fetes and fundraisers.

These clubs are the social fabric of our rural communities in Moyne. Many more than the 50 per cent documented that are employed directly in agriculture also rely on agriculture for their income. Moyne really does ride on the cow and sheep's back. If local farms are going well, the shops down the main street are going well; that is common knowledge. So any threat to this industry would be crippling to Moyne and its rural towns and the families of Moyne.

Just moving on from that, we also had just last week a presentation to a council workshop from a group called Lets Talk. Lets Talk are a group that Jim has been involved with closely that advocate for the improvement of mental health services to rural Victorians and farmers. They actually started up out of a tragic circumstance where the group founder's son actually committed suicide himself.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, we have to move on. How long will you speak for, Jim?

**Cr MEADE:** Yes, I will be quick. I just want to make this point. The extra pressure and stress put on by the threat of invasion by these animal activists is not helping the statistics of rural health for farmers in the Moyne shire and across Victoria. Strong deterrence will relieve some of that pressure where they do not know when they are going to turn up—it could be at any stage and create a lot of extra pressure for farmers who already have got a lot to deal with without having to worry about that. As mentioned earlier, the fines and deterrents that are in place at the moment are obviously not working, not strong enough.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Jim, do you want to speak?

**Cr DOUKAS:** Yes. I was here most of the morning and I have heard the word 'terrorism'. I know it is a strong word, but if you replace the animal activists going onto our farm with, say, six people dressed in black walking or breaking into a city's water supply with a drum of poison, what would you call that? I cannot see the difference. The whole aim is to disrupt the whole economy. It is not breaking into a farm to pinch a calf or a sheep. The ultimate aim is to destroy the economy. Blowing up a power plant: that is an act of terrorism. Going into an abattoir trying to destroy an abattoir, to close it down forever, what is that? If Midfield closed tomorrow because they had had enough, Warrnambool would close, because it is so dependent on private enterprise. Public servants, with due respect, rely on someone to make a profit to pay the taxes to pay the public servants. If people just give up doing what they do, no-one is there to pay and the end result is that the whole economy falls to pieces. So I think this Committee should look at the seriousness of what is happening. From little things big things grow, so I hope you can nip it in the bud now with due penalties.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Jim.

**Mr SMITH:** There are two things that concern me here: animal activists and farm invasion. I am approximately an hour north of here. We are on a cropping farm, and in the past when genetically modified crops were coming in there was farm invasion, damaging equipment and machinery, mixing chemicals and generally causing a lot of cost and that to grain farmers. My main concern is there should be a review of the penalties for this. We have heard all morning and this afternoon about the very limited penalties being handed down to the proponents of these illegal acts. We had the UDV, I think in their presentation, set up a minimum penalty, so I would just like to see these penalties being enforced and the Government to sort of look at making sure that these penalties are enforced to protect the farms, not only the animals but the cropping farmers.

**Ms BATH:** Thank you, gentlemen, and I am so glad you have been able to have this impromptu hearing today. I also want to thank you because it is very clear, and Moyne shire is an example—and Gippsland is

another example—of the importance and value of farming in our community, and not just in our regional community but through the docks of Melbourne, where there is export as well. So I thank you for that, and I endorse your comments around elevating the position of farming enterprises. I guess one of my concerns relates to mental health in relation to that it is, I guess, background noise, but you mentioned that there is this added layer of concern. What should we do as a Committee, what recommendation should we make to the Government, in order to reduce that background noise and that anxiety in terms of mental health? What should we do to help support our farmers to reduce mental health issues in relation to activism?

**Cr DOUKAS:** Well, I would say give them the right to farm. People need to be able to get up in the morning and go and do their job. The fear of activism, even if it is only reading it in the paper, those people wonder, ‘I wonder when they are coming to my place?’, or, ‘They went to Tom’s yesterday’. You know they go to the market and they hear that it might have been 20 miles away, but it is in their background. If they are under stress, especially in the dairy industry, and if they are under pressure, it could be just enough to tip them over the edge.

**Cr MEADE:** Thanks for the question. The basic answer is: stronger deterrence and stronger penalties to put at ease the minds of farmers, so that they will know that if any activists come onto their farms, they are going to get whacked pretty hard.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Now, Daniel, I know you are a very eminent spokesman on behalf of the agricultural industry; you are a Nuffield scholar. You have just travelled around the world looking at other systems of agriculture, and I am going to ask you how we compare. In this agenda we now have the added aspect that cows are the new coal in as much as people are arguing that the emissions from cows—you know, considerable damage to the economy, even in the last hearing—are worse than the fossil fuel emissions. So can you comment on cows being the new coal, and how we compare with the rest of the world in how we produce animals in the agricultural industry?

**Cr MEADE:** Thanks, Bev, for the question. I actually think that the places I have been to around the world, and I will go to the UK, for example, our divide here between metropolitan and rural areas is greater than what they have got in some of their areas there. They have stronger connections with their rural backgrounds. Many of them still do have cousins living on farms or living in small villages where they walk through the rural communities and have a better understanding of agriculture. I think that is what it comes down to: if you have a good understanding and have some education of what agriculture is about and what animal agriculture is about, you will understand that 99 per cent look after their animals well. Because if they are looked after, it is bread on the table for them and their family. That is the first point.

To the second point about the emissions, I think that if I answered that for too long, it would give it too much credit. It is rubbish.

**The CHAIR:** If there are no further questions, I would really like to thank you on behalf of the Committee for the late notice; we have managed to do it. You will receive a copy of the transcript for your proofreading. Thank you very much, and thanks to everyone in the public gallery. I would like to thank staff, colleagues and everyone. The hearing is closed.

**Committee adjourned.**