

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of animal rights activism on Victorian agriculture

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

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WITNESSES

Ms Mhairi Roberts, Animal Welfare Policy Manager, RSPCA Victoria, and

Mr Jed Goodfellow, Science and Policy Team Lead, RSPCA Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. 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 you start, can you please state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask you questions. Welcome.

Ms ROBERTS: Mhairi Roberts.

Mr GOODFELLOW: And Jed Goodfellow, RSPCA Australia.

Ms ROBERTS: So firstly we would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear today. RSPCA Victoria is a non-government community-based charity that was established in 1871. We work to prevent cruelty to animals by actively promoting their care and protection. RSPCA Victoria is a member of the RSPCA federation in Australia. Each state and territory member society is a member, and the federal body is RSPCA Australia. The RSPCA has collectively become Australia's leading and most trusted animal welfare charity. Across the state, RSPCA Victoria's community services include work undertaken by our inspectorate, animal care centres, clinics and prevention and education teams. We work to educate the community regarding animal welfare and work with government and industry to ensure the standard of animal welfare continues to improve.

RSPCA Victoria does not promote an end to animal use or consumption by people. Instead our philosophy is that all animals should have a good life and die a humane death. RSPCA Victoria does not support any kind of illegal activity in the pursuit of animal welfare objectives. We believe that animal welfare improvements can be achieved through productive engagement with key stakeholders and democratic processes rather than through illegal activities. Victoria already has criminal and biosecurity laws in place that can be applied in cases where activists illegally enter farming properties. In addition, research has demonstrated that the creation of new or harsher punishments in responding to crime does not reduce offending through the mechanism of general deterrence. We are also concerned with the broader social context in which increasing levels of animal activism are occurring and how government and industry could respond to this. Community attitudes towards animal welfare and farming are changing and so too are expectations regarding appropriate standards for animal welfare.

So in saying that, we would like to table two reports that we referenced in our written submission for the Committee's consideration that speak to these changing community attitudes. The first is *Victorians' Attitudes to Farming*, which was commissioned by the Victorian Government in 2011, and the second is a national study, which is *Australia's Shifting Mindset on Farm Animal Welfare*, which was commissioned by the federal department of agriculture last year. The Victorian study found that the humane treatment of animals was one of the three top issues of public concern about farming in Victoria. The study found that despite high levels of general support for farmers across all demographic segments, 32 per cent of the 1000 Victorians surveyed held a low level of trust that farmers would address animal welfare concerns without being pressured to do so.

Both reports show that attitudes and expectations of ordinary Australians are evolving, and if industry practices do not keep pace to meet these expectations it will result in eroding levels of trust in animal agriculture and increasing challenges to its social licence. Both rural and urban Australians alike want good animal welfare, and the vast majority are calling for more action from Government to help achieve it. They want assurances that animal welfare standards are adequate and that standards are being met. Transparency and communication of agricultural practices at all stages of the food production process can be an effective way of increasing consumer confidence and understanding.

Strategies for promoting transparency could include clearer product labelling, more rigorous third-party auditing, the installation of closed-circuit television cameras in agricultural facilities or abattoirs and the

development of farm open days and visitation programs. Government also has a role to play in promoting transparency and building trust by ensuring robust animal welfare compliance and monitoring systems are in place and that there is public reporting on compliance activities to provide assurances to the community that appropriate standards are being met. Rather than introducing new legislation, RSPCA Victoria believes that enhancing enforcement of current legislation through intelligence gathering, compliance monitoring and resourcing should be explored. As it has been shown that stricter regulation and penalties do not deter activists, it is important to focus on the issues that are driving the behaviour. Greater transparency improves public attitudes and confidence the industry is treating animals more humanely. We believe that government as well as industry has a role to play in promoting this transparency by ensuring robust animal welfare systems are in place as well as by investing more in animal welfare initiatives. We thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and we look forward to responding to your questions.

Mr FINN: I chaired this Committee when we investigated the RSPCA—it was last year, I think—so I think the RSPCA is very much on the right track after a period of perhaps a little wobbliness. But if we were to listen to the evidence that we have heard today and we were to believe it, we would be of the view that you are not doing your job. Failing miserably you are, according to the evidence that we have had presented to us today. What do you need to do your job if indeed that is the case?

Ms ROBERTS: In terms of investigations of animals and farms?

Mr FINN: Protection of animals, basically, yes.

Ms ROBERTS: So in terms of this Inquiry RSPCA Victoria has a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, and that outlines the responsibilities of our role, as with the RSPCA Victorian inspectorate. The MOU that we have clearly outlines our responsibility in relation to animals and investigations under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. It clearly outlines that the RSPCA has responsibility for primary production animals where less than 10, which includes cattle, sheep, pigs, goats and deer, and 50 in the cases of poultry. For all commercial quantities of livestock those cruelty complaints that are received are investigated by the department.

Mr FINN: Thank you. Do you worry that the activities of some of the more extreme animal rights groups might hurt the public perception of the RSPCA and perhaps, more importantly, the relationships that you have built up with farmers over a long period of time?

Ms ROBERTS: So as I said my opening statement, we do not condone illegal activity, and that is not something we are involved in.

Mr FINN: No, I realise that. I understand that, but perception and reality are quite often not at all in any way related. Do you worry that the actions of others may reflect badly on yourselves, that you may be caught up—unintended consequences and all that sort of thing—and your reputation may be damaged in the public arena and also with regard to the relationships with farmers that you may have built up over a long period of time?

Ms ROBERTS: Well, we do speak regularly with government and industry, and we advocate directly on improvements where we think that they can be made, so I do not think that other organisations or individuals' activity would necessarily reflect on us. We work to build these relationships, and we would rather have conversations directly, so I cannot really comment on that specifically.

Mr GOODFELLOW: I think, just to add to that, we understand a lot of the criticism certainly that we have heard today is in relation to compliance monitoring regimes around commercial livestock operations, and as we have just heard, RSPCA Victoria does not have jurisdiction over those commercial livestock operations. So the criticisms really are not so much levelled at RSPCA Victoria; they are more broad criticisms about the general compliance monitoring activities and enforcement within this commercial livestock space.

Mr FINN: So we should be looking at the department of agriculture?

Mr GOODFELLOW: Well, they have got primary responsibility for commercial livestock.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you both for your submission here this afternoon and also for the body of work the RSPCA has done over its lifetime not just here but internationally. Given the restrictions that you have just outlined that are imposed on the RSPCA surrounding commercial activities in the animal agriculture sector, in your opinion do you believe that the powers, the laws, surrounding those commercial activities should be separated also from the department of agriculture and an independent, centralised authority to monitor, improve and uphold welfare laws be set up, and if so, what might that look like?

Ms ROBERTS: That is a great question. I do not know that I today would be able to propose a complete model, but I can say that we would support a central body that would oversee and coordinate the development and review of animal welfare standards. We do know that the Government has committed to reviewing the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, which we think is a really great step forward, and as others have mentioned today, there are some things that we would like to see included in that review which would look at sentencing of animals being included in the Act as well as duty of care provisions. We think that is also really important. But we do, however, have some concerns with standard setting, specifically around farm animals where there have been national standards and guidelines developed for cattle and sheep, which from our understanding are yet to be written into Victorian legislation, and that is something that is of concern to us because we want to ensure that our standards and guidelines for all animals are based on contemporary animal welfare science and are also meeting current community expectations.

Mr GOODFELLOW: Just also on that point, the Australian Productivity Commission did a review into the regulation of Australian agriculture in 2016. They identified a number of failings in the current framework and they proposed the establishment of an Australian animal welfare commission, which would be an independent statutory body to oversee the development of national standards, to coordinate the states in relation to implementing those standards and also to report and review on compliance monitoring and enforcement arrangements at the state level as well.

Mr MEDDICK: Was that because there is either a perceived or real conflict of interest between various departments of agriculture and those that they are supposed to be looking after?

Mr GOODFELLOW: The Productivity Commission did identify at least a perception of a conflict of interest on behalf of state and territory departments of agriculture because of that dual role in both promoting livestock agriculture in terms of its profitability and productivity but also, on the other hand, regulating and protecting animal welfare standards. At times those two objectives can come into conflict. Sometimes they are mutually compatible of course, but in many cases we see that there is a significant conflict between appropriate welfare standards and productivity and profitability of the particular enterprise and the industry as a whole.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you for coming here today. We know that the RSPCA is a very credible and well-regarded organisation, and I am pleased to see that you do not support illegal activity and the pursuit of animal welfare objectives. That is encouraging. I presume you do not support an end to the animal meat production industry either.

Ms ROBERTS: As I have said, we would like to see improvements in the industry but we would want to work with farmers to see those animal welfare improvements, and we are not calling for an end to the industry.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Also, I notice that you are quoting from this document—Australia's shifting mindset. I am sure, given that you are such a credible organisation, you would want research and statistics to be done well. That document, producing a statistic that 95 per cent of people view farm animal welfare as of concern, was completed with a total of 1521 respondents around Australia. In fact there was no focus group work done in regional and rural Victoria. Would you see that as a credible document to be quoting from?

Mr GOODFELLOW: The Department of Agriculture certainly thinks it is a credible document. We cannot comment on the methodology. I would advise that any issues to do with what is reported in that document you take up with the authors of the report.

Mrs McARTHUR: But would that be in your experience a good sample?

Mr GOODFELLOW: We are not experts on—

Mrs McARTHUR: But you are prepared to quote from them as a statistic.

Mr GOODFELLOW: Well, so is the Australian government. That is their report. They are quoting it.

Mrs McARTHUR: Also, we heard from somebody else—and please correct us if it is wrong—that the RSPCA does have some financial difficulties at present. If we are going to have a new auditing body of farm agriculture and commercial farm operations, would you see yourselves involved in it, and what cost would that be to your organisation?

Ms ROBERTS: I suppose, to take the first part of your question, to comment on our financial—the information provided is incorrect. We do report on all our—

Mrs McARTHUR: Then that is good. We need to correct the record. Somebody made that claim that you had financial difficulties due to a case.

Ms ROBERTS: All of our financial reporting is available on our website and is externally audited, so anyone is welcome to go and look at that.

Mrs McARTHUR: That should be corrected.

Ms ROBERTS: Sorry. Could you repeat the second half of your question, please?

Mrs McARTHUR: Would you be in a position to conduct the auditing that you also support if we are going to have a greater degree of regulation and supervision of commercial agricultural production?

Ms ROBERTS: As we discussed before, that is a matter for the department because they are the lead agency when it comes to these investigations. Without knowing a lot more detail about the proposition, I am not sure that that is something that we can comment on at this stage.

Mrs McARTHUR: You probably would not necessarily be involved?

Ms ROBERTS: We might be. Sorry, Jed.

Mr GOODFELLOW: Under the current memorandum of understanding with the Government, we do not have responsibility for commercial livestock, so I would not imagine the RSPCA would be stepping back into that role with some new entity. However, when it comes to animal welfare law enforcement services our view is the more investment in that, from various departments and organisations, the better, so long as there is a central authority that oversees the administration of the legislation and the appointment of inspectors to ensure consistency across the board. Because at the moment we have got a number of different departments and groups that play some role in the enforcement of the legislation, and it would improve the system considerably if there was a centralised body.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you.

Mr BARTON: Neil Comrie did a report on the transformation of the RSPCA Victorian inspectorate back in 2016. Just to give the Committee some confidence, what were the ramifications for the RSPCA, what have you taken up and what is different now?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, sure. Our response to the report is also publicly available on our website, and we also do report regularly on how we have been tracking with that. I am more than happy to provide the Committee with that information so that you can read through it, but we have progressed quite well. We have completed most of the recommendations that have been set, and we will hopefully soon be closing the last of them out as well.

The CHAIR: You will receive in a few weeks a copy of the transcript for proofreading. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you very much for your time and your contribution. Thank you.

Mr GOODFELLOW: Thank you.

Ms ROBERTS: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.