

Reports and Comments

Australian review into live animal export

Australia has a significant live animal export trade — during 2018 over 2 million live cattle, sheep, goats and buffalo were exported by air or sea for either breeding purposes or slaughter. However, although live animal export generates substantial revenue for the Australian economy, the export trade is controversial due to a number of tragic animal welfare incidents that have happened over previous years.

In 2017, a high profile incident occurred during which 2,400 sheep died whilst travelling by ship from Fremantle, Australia, to Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. This equated to a 3.76% mortality rate of the 63,804 sheep exported — well over the 2% (now 1%) threshold at which departmental review is required. The majority of sheep were found to have died of heat stress.

This incident triggered the Australian Government to initiate an independent review to be carried out into the regulatory capability, powers, practices and culture of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources as regulator of live animal exports. Under the review terms of reference, it was stated that: “The review will make recommendations on any improvements to regulatory and investigative performance to ensure persons involved in the live export trade are compliant with regulations and maintain high standards of animal welfare, and the department is a trusted regulator of the live animal exports trade.” Ten areas were given for assessment.

Mr Philip Moss, supported by two departmental officers, was selected as the independent external advisor to undertake the review and the review team travelled to Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and the Northern Territory. Views were sought in writing and in person from ministers, departmental staff, regulatory agencies, livestock associations, exporters and exporter associations, animal welfare organisations and veterinary officers, amongst others. The ‘Moss Report’ was published in September 2018.

The Report is structured around the ten areas of assessment given in the original terms of reference and 31 recommendations were made in total. The first recommendation is that a review of the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock (ASEL) occurs on a regular basis. The ASEL set out basic standards for live animal export from the farm of origin to the country of destination and exporters must comply with the standards to be granted an export licence. A review of the ASEL was due in 2013 but not carried out. It is recommended that the review of the ASEL reflect industry, scientific and regulatory developments and community expectations concerning live animal exports. It

is also recommended that the department work with the live animal export industry to develop comprehensive animal welfare indicators relating to every point of the export supply chain and for those indicators to become part of the regulatory framework. Although the ASEL include various measures to assess welfare outcomes (including acceptable mortality levels; untipped horns; heavy animals; lame animals; animals with existing minor health conditions; pregnancy; and risk of heat stress), in practice, mortality is the primary measure used and the Report considers that the “focus on mortality fails to recognise the suffering of animals on the voyage who survive the journey.”

Another significant recommendation is that an Animal Welfare Branch be re-established: to bring greater focus to live animal export; to introduce relevant expertise into the department; and to improve its connection with animal welfare organisations. Additionally, it was recommended that an external, independent Inspector General of Live Animal Exports be enlisted to provide oversight of the department as regulator.

The Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources, Hon David Littleproud, and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources have both responded to the Moss review and either fully support, or support in principle, all of the recommendations. Minister Littleproud has stated that work will begin immediately to establish an animal welfare branch within the Department and that legislative amendments will be brought forward to facilitate the establishment of an Inspector General of Live Animal Exports.

It is hoped that this latest review will lead to improvements in the health and welfare of live animals exported from Australia.

Review of the Regulatory Capability and Culture of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources in the Regulation of Live Animal Exports (September 2018). A4, 84 pages. Available at: <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/export/moss-review.pdf>.

Government Response to the Moss Review (October 2018). A4, 1 page. Available at: <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/export/moss-review-government-response.pdf>.

Review of the Regulatory Capability and Culture of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources in the Regulation of Live Animal Exports: Response of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (the Regulator) (2018). A4, 22 pages. Available at: <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/export/moss-review-department-response.pdf>.

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