

SUBMISSION TO SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON RURAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT
ENQUIRY INTO ANIMAL WELFARE STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIA'S LIVE EXPORT MARKETS

SUBMISSION MADE BY

MS LESLIE THIELE

PASTORALIST

WEST KIMBERLEY REGION

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION

Includes the personal opinions of the author as to the importance of the live export trade of cattle into South East Asian markets and some history and background of the industry in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Some discussion of welfare issues pertaining to said trade both in Australia and export markets.

Some discussion of possible ramifications of the closure of live export industries to the Northern Pastoral areas.

INTRODUCTION

I am a Pastoralist involved in the live export industry. Our business is run on a portion of a Pastoral lease held by my partner's family since the 1960's and situated in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. We are a small producer of high quality Brahman cattle sold exclusively into the live export markets of South East Asia, mainly Indonesia. I have been living and working on the property since 1990 and my partner and I have been running our business on the property since 1994.

BACKGROUND OF LIVE EXPORT INDUSTRY IN THE KIMBERLEYS

The Northern Pastoral industry in the early 1990's was still in a general downturn which was at its worst during the slump of the 1970's. Land values were low and conditions on stations in the North were generally quite poor due to a lack of investment in the Northern Pastoral regions. There were no finances available to upgrade vehicles or machinery with any funds being put towards basic maintenance of existing infrastructure. Wages for Pastoral industry workers were low and their working conditions generally poor. Some pastoralists had managed to stay on the land only through compensation monies paid by the Government for the BTEC program and once that was finished there was little room for progress. Cattle were worth little and once the Northern abattoirs closed due to being financially unviable the cost of sending cattle to Southern markets (2500kms) negated any gains made in sales. It was at this time Pastoralists tried various ventures (mainly small tourism operations) to try and keep themselves on the land.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF LOW CATTLE PRICES BEFORE LIVE EXPORT COMMENCED

In order to make enough money to operate their Pastoral Leases most Pastoralists had to take note of economies of scale and run large numbers of cattle on their land. This led inevitably to a general decline in the health Northern rangelands. Pastures became degraded and river systems became eroded due to the sheer numbers of cattle in the region. With no money available to improve breeding and fertility among the Northern herd generally there was a decline in the quality of cattle in the Kimberley and they became known locally as 'Kimberley Rats' being a mainly shorthorn derived animal with all the problems that inbreeding and poor pasture quality bring. Animal welfare generally could be said to be poor although this was not due to lack of knowledge or care on the part of the Pastoralist but simply lack of funds and manpower.

BEGINNING OF THE LIVE EXPORT TRADE FOR NORTHERN CATTLE

The live export industry began to evolve in the North in the early 1990's – around 92-93 – by 1995 our business consisted exclusively of supplying the live export market, mainly to Indonesia. The reasons for this were threefold –

1. Being paid a reasonable price for the cattle live weight made the cattle business finally show profits again.
2. The 'feeder' market (cattle sold at 18-24 months) meant Pastoralists could run more breeders yet have less cattle 'on the ground' at any one time improving pastures.
3. The live export market required cattle of 'bos indicus' infusion rather than 'bos taurus' which were tropical cattle more suited to the Northern climate and rangelands. They required less

chemical intervention due to a natural resistance to ticks and other diseases common to the region.

IMMEDIATE BENEFITS OF THE LIVE EXPORT TRADE IN THE KIMBERLEY REGION

Within five years of the live export trade being implemented the Northern herds began to improve as finances became available to purchase superior breeding stock and implement control measures for feral cattle. Industry generally began putting money into research and development which led to widespread immediate improvements including (but not exclusive to) –

- Improved herd fertility
- Control of wildfire events
- Rangeland management and grazing systems
- Invasive weed control protection of river systems
- Better road and transport systems
- Better cattle handling facilities
- Improved animal husbandry and handling
- Disease control
- Education programs for young people entering the industry
- Improved communication systems
- Improved herd genetics

LOCAL ANIMAL WELFARE STANDARDS UNDER LIVE EXPORT MARKET CONDITIONS

The general standards of animal welfare conditions in the North improved markedly due mainly to the fact that the cattle became a valuable commodity but also through industry regulation and the adoption of codes of practise for the handling and transport of livestock. This rise in standards was readily adopted by the Pastoral industry as the market demanded quiet, well handled, well bred and conditioned animals.

The adoption of new tagging and recording systems – and more recently the National Livestock Identification System – led to individual pastoralists striving to improve their herds continually as cattle could be traced back to individual properties of origin and the buyers began to seek out those producers who could supply cattle to their personal specifications.

Benefits flowing directly from this include –

- Disease control
- Radical improvements in rangeland conditions eg. More grass=heavier cattle=more profit.
- Improvements in breed genetics
- Efficiency of operations
- Improved safety for both animals and workers
- Improved employment prospects for local people
- An influx of young people back into the industry as career prospects improved
- Property values increasing attracting investment back into the Northern regions

- Adoption of advanced technologies in the supply of power and water systems (mainly solar) reducing the reliance on 'dirty' fuels

EFFECT ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Communities in the North became once again vibrant and progressive as increased prospects and improved quality of life breathed new life into areas which, since WWII had become little more than backwaters. New families moved to these areas bringing with them new ideas and businesses built around the growing optimism of the pastoral industry. Health and education improved as families demanded improved conditions. Wages for station workers rose as experienced stock handlers became sought after by industry. Occupational health and safety became an accepted part of industry. Homesteads were improved; vehicles and roads became safer as upgrades were implemented.

The effects of the recent ban (and subsequent lifting of) the live cattle trade to Indonesia are yet to be fully realised by the communities of the North but the dramatic effects on the psyche of people in the North can give some indication as to the importance of this trade to the North of Australia.

PASTORALISTS AS ENVIRONMENTALISTS?

Northern cattle producers are some of the most environmentally friendly farmers on Earth. We do not cut down forests or clear land to feed cattle. We rely on a healthy biodiversity on our properties to create the balanced environment needed for good native pasture growth. We utilise native pasture and control invasive weeds as standard practise. We use early dry season (cool) burns to prevent the damage to the environment – and our pastures – of later (hot) dry season wildfires. We use very few chemicals because our cattle are adapted to the climate and graze healthy free range pastures. We do not subject our cattle to intensive feedlot systems such as is common in the US. Our properties are both arid and tropical at different times of the year and we manage those conditions as a matter of course along with regular drought, flood, fire and cyclonic events. Northern Pastoralists should be congratulated for their innovative and positive attitudes to adverse conditions and produce a world class product.

ANIMAL WELFARE IN THE LIVE EXPORT SYSTEM

The live export of animals in general seems to be little understood outside our own industry. I can comment only on the Northern live cattle trade as that is what I know.

Our cattle are well handled and used to being transported paddock to paddock by truck. They are hand fed as weaners and readily settle into yard conditions with little apparent stress. The first thing a stressed animal will do is lose weight – the last thing producers want as they are sold on a live weight basis – so every effort is made to ensure cattle are relaxed when yarded for transport.

Transport operators dealing with livestock are well aware that they are carrying valuable animals. If a transport company mishandled or crowded animals they would be out of business very quickly as no cattle producer would use them. Our livestock transporters are professional people in whom we have great confidence.

Pastoralists regularly attend the export holding yards close to port and, once again, any rogue operator there would be shunned by both exporters and pastoralists. The cattle change ownership at this point and the exporter takes over the duty of care for the animals.

Every kilo an animal puts on between purchase and landing at its destination is profit for the buyer – this is one of the reasons the Indonesians require ‘feeder’ cattle rather than animals ready for slaughter – so it is in their own interests that the cattle feed well on the ships and travel in a relaxed fashion. The ships used to transport cattle are state of the art and designed specifically for the purpose of keeping the animals in good condition. Mortality rates are extremely low.

Once in the feedlot overseas again every kilo gained is of benefit to the purchaser. Bos indicus cattle are tropical in origin and have no problem going into the South East Asian climate.

Point being – it is in everyone’s interest, right through the chain of supply that the cattle are well handled, relaxed and feeding well.

The live export trade to our close neighbours has no major animal welfare concerns per se.

POINT OF SLAUGHTER

The conditions under which some animals have been slaughtered have now been shown to be less than ideal. Producers had no prior knowledge of the abuses being perpetrated in a small numbers of rogue abattoirs in Indonesia and were sickened and appalled at footage shown on the ABC’s Four Corners program. Had producers been made aware of these conditions prior to that date I have no doubt the problems would have been fixed immediately, not through public outrage and political spin but from within our own industry. I do not believe the footage to be representative of the majority of Indonesian facilities nor do I believe such actions are acceptable to the Indonesian public.

It is my understanding that supply chain assurances have now been put in place to prevent such a situation occurring again. As a producer who is passionate about the cattle we breed and care for I have no ethical problems with the live export trade to Indonesia continuing under these assurances and with transparency of operations available to any producer who wishes to follow their animals through the chain.

WHY NOT JUST PROCESS THE BEEF IN AUSTRALIAN FACILITIES?

There are problems inherent in the idea of the Northern herd of cattle being processed as boxed beef and marketed overseas in that form.

The markets we now access feed people who are not wealthy. The relative low cost of our beef through wet markets makes protein accessible to a much wider section of these communities than previously. Most have no access to refrigeration.

Processing facilities based in the North of Australia, while welcomed by pastoralists as giving us another market to sell into, can only ever operate on a seasonal basis due to our wet/dry season. Workers at such facilities must be housed either all year round for six months work or seasonally housed during the times of year when accommodation in the North is at a premium due to mining and tourism activities. Their wages must also be high to compensate for the fact that they are only being offered seasonal work. This leads to the finished product being much more expensive than is

currently available pricing it beyond our usual buyers. In the same way that Australia has become a country with very little manufacturing base due to the high cost of the Australian worker, I can only see abattoirs in the North being viable if they have large amounts of government subsidies available to keep them going.

Cattle in the North are of a tropical breed which produces a very lean, dark cutting meat. It does not develop the marbling required by Southern consumers until feed lotted intensively on grain. The cattle must be grown out for at least another year which makes many Pastoral businesses unviable as they cannot support enough animals on the pasture available to them and even then, for the product to be acceptable to Southern Australian consumers', major re-education and advertising campaigns would have to be launched. To change the herd around to fit in better with the type of beef Australians are happy to eat would take massive amounts of money and a herd breeding turnaround of approx ten years.

If cattle from the North need to travel Southern processing facilities in our case this means at least a 2500 kilometre journey by truck for our animals. If this discussion is really about animal welfare then it stands to reason that transporting cattle so far by road is far more traumatic than the current system. Cattle lose more weight through stress travelling this way than they do on the live export ships where they have room to move and can be fed, watered and rested in transit.

CONSEQUENCES OF PROHIBITING LIVE EXPORT OF CATTLE ON NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

- *A sharp decline in the ability of Northern Pastoralists to manage and improve leases due to financial constraints and made worse by the chronic overgrazing caused by increasing numbers of cattle unsuitable for Southern markets
- *Increases in both feral animals and feral cattle causing environmental degradation to river systems
- *Decline in rural and remote populations as pastoral families and related industries move away from these areas.
- *massive devaluation of Pastoral leases causing ongoing effects of loss of investment in Northern Australia and its flow on effect to local towns and businesses.
- *Degradation of popular tourist areas as station roads and infrastructure becomes degraded.
- *Increases in the need for government funding to supply health and welfare to rural and remote communities as population decline.
- *Loss of accumulated knowledge currently held by pastoralists regarding the correct management of varied Northern landscapes.
- *Loss of improved genetics across the Northern herds.
- *Loss of 'heart' in agriculture throughout Australia generally as a result of the lack of support from both government and urban populations.

FUTURE FOOD SECURITY

I believe that world food security will become – in the near future – the single most important issue in the world. To jeopardise the production of high quality protein such as is produced with the efficiency and with so little environmental impact as the Northern cattle industry does is nothing less than short sighted opinion poll driven stupidity.

I support research into alternative markets for our cattle, if only to introduce some healthy competition and allow producers some autonomy in our own industry. We are too exposed to political whim on both sides of the Timor Sea for comfort and a stable industry is a viable industry.

IN CLOSING

We love our animals. We are very good at what we do. We are tired of being treated as though we have done something wrong when the truth is we have done everything right and abided by all the regulations and restrictions placed upon us.

I have never made a submission before and beg your indulgence as to any errors in format I may have made. I ask that the lateness of this document not prejudice you against it.

While you are doing your job ensuring these matters are investigated with the proper scrutiny we will be out in the paddocks doing ours. We chase cattle for a living, that's what we do.....and sometimes they chase us.

Yours respectfully

Leslie Thiele