



Community and Public Sector Union

Rupert Evans – Deputy Secretary

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Canberra ACT 2600
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Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into beef imports into Australia

The PSU Group of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) represents workers in the Australian Public Service (APS), and is the principal union covering staff in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF).

CPSU members working in the DAFF meat inspection service have considerable knowledge and experience in DAFF operations and issues regarding contamination of meat. Federal meat inspectors have been working for decades to detect and prevent the contamination of export meat in Australia. This submission reflects the views of our members working in those areas and has been guided by their experience and expertise.

The CPSU only seeks to make two key points in this submission. Therefore, the terms of reference have not been addressed separately.

Danger to meat industry posed by contamination

Australia is free of a number of diseases that have been found in cattle in other countries, including bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). The absence of these diseases ensures that Australian beef continues to be one of the safest and most sought after in the world.

After downturns in the last decade, including as a result of drought and the strong Australian dollar, the Australian export meat industry is still on the road to recovery. Cattle numbers

were at their lowest for many decades after the drought and this has taken a large toll on the farmers.

The Australian beef industry would be devastated if diseases such as BSE or FMD were found in Australian cattle. There would be huge additional costs and losses for the industry through further losses of cattle and the costs of eradicating such diseases. These costs would drastically affect all parties in both the beef export market, which is worth billions of dollars, as well as the domestic market. Those affected would include farmers, abattoirs, meat and live exporters, and could lead to significant job losses in the industry.

A reduction in available beef would also lead to higher prices for consumers. No doubt other submissions will provide more detail on potential adverse effects on the industry.

Australia has the one of the highest reputations for producing safe, disease free beef for export and domestic consumption. Other countries that have been affected by BSE and FMD have had their reputations tainted and their trading partners reject beef imports. It takes the industry in a country many years to recover from this and, even then, other countries may still be nervous about accepting meat from that country.

One only needs to observe the devastation caused by outbreaks of BSE in the USA and Canada to see these effects. Not only was their export trade affected, but domestic sales also dropped due to the loss of confidence by consumers.

To protect the beef industry that our country economy relies heavily upon, CPSU rejects the proposal to allow importation of beef meat from countries that have been exposed to FMD and BSE.

Inspection of red meat imports by DAFF meat inspectors

In the 1980s, Australia's export meat industry was placed under threat when a company was found to be using kangaroo meat as a substitute for beef. In response to that, certain guarantees were put in place to satisfy overseas markets that the species they were importing was correct.

One of those guarantees was a species test program in which Federal Government inspectors performed checks by sampling meat that was ready for export to prove the species labelled on a carton was true to the product in the box. This species test has been successfully performed in Australian export plants for the past 30 years.

Australian federal meat inspectors performed this species test sampling in the domestic market until 1994 and continue to carry on the same testing to this date in the export trade.

CPSU recommends that this same testing be expanded to the importation of red meat. This would introduce an additional safeguard against the risk of BSE and FMD contamination and it would also protect against other forms of contamination, such as the substitution of horsemeat for beef that occurred recently in Europe.

The costs of the import inspection could be borne by the importers who would gain from the reduced likelihood of a contamination incident and increased consumer confidence in the purchase of imported red meat.

DAFF meat inspectors are best placed to perform this testing. They are well trained in testing for meat contamination and have the expertise and experience from performing this work for the past 30 years. Also, having this task undertaken by Government employees ensures both actual and perceived thoroughness and independence from the importers. CPSU has previously stressed the importance of maintaining a rigorous and independent inspection system to this committee in past submissions.¹

Yours sincerely,

Rupert Evans

¹ See Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Inquiry into the Removal of Rebate for AQIS Export Certification Functions*, 2009