

Submission for Live Export Review

This submission is from our point of view as sheep producers.

I would like to attempt to convey to this review how important live export is to us as West Australian sheep producers. As you are no doubt aware, WA contributes around 80% of the total sheep exported each year from Australia.

Firstly, a bit of background. Both my wife and myself are third generation farmers. Her parents are still involved, running our recently acquired pastoral station Gabyon in the Murchison district, just west of Yalgoo, some 200 kms from the City of Geraldton. We also own a 2200 acre mixed enterprise property 45 kms south of Geraldton purchased in 2005 and a small 240 acre property 25 kms south of Geraldton purchased in 2003 when the family moved up from the Three Springs / Eneabba district after selling their farm there.

Currently we run approximately 10 000 commercial breeding ewes at Gabyon, and 2000 stud breeders at the Geraldton properties. Around fifteen years ago the decision was made to move away from the merino sheep breed, mainly due to extremely low wool prices, and the amount of work involved in running a merino flock. The breeding was slowly switched to the Damara, a shedding breed which requires no mulsing, tail docking, castration, shearing, crutching or fly strike prevention. It is extremely well suited to the pastoral country and suits a low cost, low impact management system for the rangelands.

Unfortunately, despite a number of trials done with the WA Department of Agriculture and independent producer trials, local processors are reluctant to accept them. They are the least preferred option when other stock is available. They are, however, one of the preferred breeds for the Middle East market, as they are very similar to their native breeds. The catch is they want a live animal. Their culture demands it. It is a source of pride for a group of men to wander through the pen of sheep, argue over which one is best, then take it home and proudly display to his wife and family how he got the best animal in the market. I agree the handling of them needs to improve. But I would like to point out that restraining an animal by tying it's legs and placing it in a vehicle is nothing new. It happens on Australian farms everyday. And most people are able to restrain a sheep well enough to cut its throat. I remind the review that once the arteries are severed in a sheep's throat unconsciousness follows within seconds. I have had the unfortunate task of destroying many sheep with both a rifle and a knife. When done properly the knife is just as humane.

This does not mean, however, that we shouldn't strive for improvements and exporters, importers and industry bodies have been making those improvements. From home delivery services offered by feedlotter, to hand carts for moving individual sheep and the uptake of professionally slaughtered meat in quality abattoirs. But we cannot expect to change a culture thousands of years old in a few

short years. Telling an Arab man he cannot take an animal home live for his family is like telling an Australian man he can have a BBQ but only his wife can cook on it.

The live export industry provides a means for moving huge numbers of sheep out of the state. The years 2006 and 2007 were the driest recorded in our part of the world. Coupled with the drought in the Eastern states, meaning they couldn't take stock offloaded from WA, we were facing a massive animal welfare and environmental crisis if sheep could not be moved off properties. There was a 4 week wait for ourselves to get stock into the WA processors, the supply of offloaded stock was that great. And the price offered by both exporters and processors fell dramatically, as expected, but we were able to offload stock on a weekly basis to the exporters, saving us a fortune in feed costs and potential damage to our properties. There is just not the processing capacity in the state to handle the numbers of sheep exported each year.

The live export industry provides a floor in the market. Up until recently, history has shown when export buyers aren't in the market sale yard prices have fallen. The current shortage of sheep has led to high prices consistently, but both sides are bidding for them. The shortage of sheep is not due to live export, it is due to a combination of persistent low wool prices, bad seasons and an increase in grain prices. 2010 alone saw just over one million ewes leave WA for the Eastern states due to their long awaited good season and dry conditions again in the West. And now that high prices are holding producers are hanging onto ewes as breeders that they would usually have sold as mutton to the processors. I have consistently said to buyers if they paid a half decent price for stock regularly they wouldn't be paying through the nose for them now. But that's simple supply and demand at work.

I firmly believe the argument that live export takes away Australian jobs is a furphy. For years we have been hearing how processors face closure because they cannot find staff. If it were not for overseas workers the processors would be struggling to stay open. Nobody wants to work in a slaughterhouse when they can drive an air-conditioned dump truck for ridiculous money. And the amount of investment required to increase the processing capacity to handle all the animals that are shipped out would be huge. Peter Trefort, owner of Hillside Meats abattoir, and MLA board member has publicly stated the demise of the live shipping would see the demise of WA processing. The owner of Geraldton Meat Exports attended a rally in support of live export held in Geraldton on the 24th of June with the same concerns. Many producers would simply switch to cropping. And the fact that the three largest processors in Australia do not have facilities in the north tells me they cannot make money there.

I have heard the statement live shipping is the lazy option for producers. I would suggest selling your product for a similar cost but with a reduced risk and decreased cost of production is not lazy, it is simply good business. The buyers offer a price per head and draft off which sheep they want on the day. The producer knows what he will get once the sheep are delivered, something processors have only started doing recently. We have been caught ourselves sending stock to a processor only to find

the returns weren't what we expected once the animals were processed. Many producers do aim for the top price with their top stock going to the processors, and they get that premium. But the tail of their lambs then goes to live export. To bring them up to killable specs is not viable.

I plead with the review to listen carefully to those people within the industry. I can understand why people would want the trade shut down. The images we see of cruelty are shocking, and anybody who has never seen animals slaughtered would be appalled and assume that is the norm. But it must be understood it is not the whole picture. I could go into any stock handling facility and take enough photos or video to convince people who know no better that it is barbaric and represents the majority. Likewise I could take footage from the last twelve months of AFL games and edit it to make anyone think it is the most brutal, vicious and barbaric sport ever. Please do not be fooled by Animals Australia's agenda. They are an animal rights group, not a welfare group. Their agenda is to end livestock production, not just export. They are quick to point out that 38 000 sheep died enroute last year, saying it is the equivalent of 84 full trucks of sheep. What they fail to mention is nearly 4 million survived, or the equivalent of 8889 truckloads. Any other industry with that sort of success rate would get an award. And while I support most of the RSPCA's work, I believe they have got this one wrong. If we leave the market, there will be no one there to promote change. As yet I have not seen one idea from any of these groups about improving welfare for non-Australian stock.

Thank you for your time

Michael Trant