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Submission to the Animal Welfare Standards in Australia's Live Export Markets

I do not support the live animal export trade and fully support its end, the compromise being a phase out over time as put forward in the Bill recently submitted to Parliament by Andrew Wilkie and Nick Xenophon. It is a cruel industry that treats animals as if they have no capacity for feeling fear, pain or suffering. One of the best practices that should be considered when the animal is transported for slaughter, is that it should be killed as close as possible to where it was raised. Transportation on ships under stressful, uncomfortable and cramped conditions is as far removed from this practice as one can get. There is also the added stress to these animals of transportation in order to deliver them to the loading docks.

There are a number of concerns with the management of sea journeys. Issues with loading, handling, slipping and injuries, cramped conditions, lack of attendance to the animal's wellbeing, illnesses, blindness, food suitability, grouping of strong/weak animals, waste build up, contamination of food/water, ventilation, sea spray, rough conditions, mechanical failures, lack of attendants/vets, inadequate minimum requirements for pen areas/medicines, throwing live/dead animals overboard, unloading, deaths, births, falsifying reports and required % of deaths set at rates meaning many deaths are not investigated by AQIS.

Regardless of how modern some ships may be, there are always outside risks, weather, equipment failures, disasters, meaning that no matter how well planned some journeys may be, there is always a risk lurking. Major incidents have not been confined to times when the trade was new, and only last year a terrible incident occurred where cattle deaths on a ship from Fremantle to Egypt reached 1.79% and sparked an AQIS investigation. Of the 295 deaths, 28 were unable to be determined, and many were too decomposed to determine the cause of death. All of the cattle suffered heat stress and those on the lower decks suffered the most, cleaning was also neglected by crew. These animals died a slow, painful and cruel death. There are many more of these types of reported incidents, however it leaves the question, how many go unreported? Recently a stockman who worked on these ships publicly stated he left the industry frustrated with the widespread ignorance and animal cruelty taking place.

Once Australian animals leave our country, the Australian Government has no way of ensuring the wellbeing of these poor animals. This is specifically stated in the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock, which states that at disembarkation, the responsibility for the animals is in the hands of the importing country. However, this is contradicted by the statement on the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry Live Animal Export Trade website page, stating that “The Australian Government does not tolerate cruelty towards animals and will not compromise on animal welfare standards”. By merely allowing the export of live animals to other countries who have no regard for animal welfare is indeed a compromise made on the government’s behalf.

Besides the issue of transport for these animals, their welfare and humane treatment cannot be guaranteed as we have no control over how other countries treat our animals, from general handling up to the point of slaughter. All we can do is make suggestions and provide assistance if allowed. Australia has high standards in place for the humane slaughtering of animals, and in nearly all instances it is over and above those set out in the World Organisation for Animal Health. As we all know Indonesia is a signatory to the OIE Agreement, but has shown that it has little regard for its significance and has not been able to meet its standards, which have been set at minimal levels to accommodate developing countries. If they have been unable to do this, how will it be possible for them to lift their standards to Australian expectations? Various MOUs between Australia and Middle Eastern countries are of little value, with repeated abuses often uncovered. Abuse and animal cruelty continues in these countries even when trade is resumed after temporary bans have been lifted.

There have been a number of exposes of the cruel treatment our animals endure overseas. In both the MLA/Livestock report “Live Trade Animal Welfare Partnership 2009/10 – Indonesian point of slaughter improvements Final Report” and RSPCAs “The Slaughter of Australian Cattle in Indonesia Observational Study” the findings arrived at the same conclusion, that there was a common theme of mistreatment and cruelty to our animals. The mistreatment is widespread, the MLA/Livecorp and Animals Australia investigations to various abattoirs have shown this, and the MLA/Livecorp report noted that the critical areas identified as significantly influencing animal welfare as: animal management including handling, nutrition and animal suitability, slaughter including facilities and method, and animal welfare standards and their application. This does not paint a good picture for allowing live exports to continue.

I note with interest that the MLA/Livecorp LEP’s key focus is “to ensure that suitable facilities are available for the processing of Australian animals so that they are handled and slaughtered humanely”. How long does this program need to implement this focus? They have had at the very least a good 10 years to do so, and probably more realistically, nearly 20 years and nothing has changed. All I can gather that they have done is to ensure the current inhumane methods of casting cattle are enforced by providing a box that assists in doing this. Dr Temple Grandin condemns this method, rating it the lowest possible ranking and labelling it “Serious problem Automatic Failed Audit” and that it should never be used for conscious animals still sensible. The method of cutting the cattle’s throat, amongst other abuses, leaves little to be desired, leaving them to suffer an excruciatingly painful and slow death. It shows that the training provided by MLA/Livecorp has done very little to improve animal welfare in Indonesia.

The Four Corners footage caused an outrage with the Australian public who are in total disbelief that this kind of abuse can be allowed to happen. It was extremely wrenching to see animals being abused only to then be slaughtered in the most inhumane way to die a slow and painful death. It is not acceptable and animal welfare should never be a compromise. This is what MLA and LiveCorp, the industry involved and subsequently the Australian government have allowed to happen and to continue by announcing the resumption of trade. It is known that all involved in this industry have known about these abuses for a very long time but have been prepared to turn a blind eye for the sake of money. This is truly disgusting and disheartening. It is our responsibility to ensure our animal's welfare, right through to the very end even if that is in another country. If we can't ensure their welfare, then it has to stop.

The live animal export industry has greatly affected our country and the meat processing industry, with lost income, assets and jobs, so it would greatly benefit Australia to retain the processing of animals here on our soil. The added benefit is that we can be safe in the knowledge that the animals slaughtered in Australia are governed by the highest standards and are not being submitted to undue suffering and abuse. It appears that industry believes this to be the case too, with the plan for a new slaughter house to be established in Darwin by the end of next year by Australian Agricultural Company.

In summary, there have been many arguments put forward as to why the live export trade should continue, but I feel these are unfortunately based on monetary value and are made with total disregard to animal welfare. The way those animals have been treated overseas is appalling, sickening and totally unacceptable. I don't believe Australia is doing the right thing as a developed nation by sending our animals to countries where there are no regulations in place to ensure it abides by the international agreement it is a signatory to. It really isn't good enough to have stringent rules apply here in Australia, only to disregard these once our animals leave Australian soil. Don't we have a responsibility for how these animals are treated to the very end? If we can't ensure that the animal is treated humanely once it arrives at another country, why would we continue to do so until they conform? That's what the international agreement is supposedly in place for. The measures our government wishes to put in place do very little to improve a bad situation, and even if improvements could be made in other countries, there is still the issue of sea transport and its inherent cruelty.

I hope the inquiry will reach some valuable conclusions and that any beneficial recommendations will actually be implemented. We have seen from inquiries in the past that this has not been the case, especially the inquiry from 1985 which concluded that live export is cruel and should be shut down by gradually phasing it out. I believe that time has now arrived. I will be waiting with bated breath as to the outcome of the recent Bill submitted, and I truly hope that human decency will be the winner. This issue will not be going away now that the public is aware of what has been going on for far too long.

Yours sincerely

Karina Leung