



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HON BOB KATTER MP

Federal Member for Kennedy



24 February 2010

Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senators

Inquiry on the possible impacts and consequences for public health, trade and agriculture of the government's decision to relax import restrictions on beef, especially relating to the import of beef from countries previously affected by bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE -mad cow disease)

The Senate is commended for undertaking an inquiry into this appalling decision, which there appears to be no justification for other than to promote 'free trade'.

Immediately on hearing of this decision, a number of questions come to mind:

1. Are we running out of fresh meat in Australia?
2. Do we need a progressive, fatal disease, which results in spongy degeneration of the brain and spine cord?
3. Will this make a serious international player at conferences on the control of infectious and deadly diseases together with countries where BSE has already been recorded such as Britain, US, Canada, France and parts of Asia?
4. Is our cattle industry so lucrative that we can afford to kill over 4.4million cattle (as was destroyed in Britain)? If so, can someone please inform our graziers of where their massive earnings are?
5. Are we seriously that naive to assume that this relaxation of import restrictions will assist our cattle industry and ensure the protection of our current disease free status?

Australia is the second largest exporter of beef in the world, producing 4% of the world's beef supply. The Australian Bureau of Resource Economics (ABARE) estimates the gross value of Australian beef and veal production to be around \$7.1 billion (excluding live cattle) in 2008-09, with around 60% exported. Many thousands of Australians are employed in the cattle industry and beef production. The importation of beef from countries with a history of BSE would place all of this at significant risk.

If a BSE ox or tainted beef was found in Australia, our entire beef export industry would collapse overnight. Eradication would be difficult if not impossible. Between 1987 and 2007 Britain reported more than 180,000 cases of the disease, to control this outbreak they had to kill 4.4 million cattle. Such a response would be devastating in regional Australia, with fewer farming alternatives on grazing land and major hurdles to overcome in de-stocking thousands of hectares (and then trying to re-stock these areas).

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REPRESENTING

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But the impact would not just be felt throughout our cattle industry. The Submission from the Department of Health and Aging indicates that the potential risk to human health from BSE though contamination can be managed provided there are appropriate risk mitigation strategies in place.

AQIS Track record

How can we trust that appropriate risk mitigation strategies will be put in place when we consider the track record of the Australian Quarantine Service? When officials were asked what applications they have actually rejected, they have not been able to name a single case where an application for an imported primary produce item has been rejected. Until European settlement Australia had few agricultural diseases and even today we are still a fairly isolated continental island. However, the liberal attitudes of the quarantine service has resulted in black sigatoka outbreaks in bananas, papaya fruit fly outbreaks in fruit, citrus canker outbreaks in citrus, white spot and IHNV in our seafood and barrier reef, and fire blight in apples – in fact, it is hard to find a single disease that the quarantine service has actually prevented from coming into Australia. They are the abominable “never say no” men.

If we take beef, by way of example, imported beef from Brazil was dumped at Wagga Wagga dump – no protection against the spread of disease, limited explanation by AQIS and no reported disciplinary action taken against the officers involved. Brazil has only ‘provisionally’ disease free status (not disease free status).

The black sigatoka outbreak in bananas is yet another example. This outbreak cost growers in the Tully region tens of millions in lost production and eradication. In spite of this, AQIS have lobbied both sides of the House in efforts to allow bananas in from the Philippines – a country rife with a string of diseases not present in Australia. The importation of Philippine bananas would immediately destroy Australia’s \$360m banana industry as well as our \$60m/yr pineapple industry.

The decision to allow importation is based upon the extraordinary proposition that 20 million boxes of bananas could be imported from the Philippines and not one of those boxes would contain any pathogens, bacteria or pests. Of the 21 million people in Australia, we challenge AQIS to find a single person who would agree with that proposition.

The towering irresponsibility of AQIS and successive Ministers for Agriculture is also illustrated by:

1. High court verdict in the pork case. The *ratio* of the case was that there were no rules or administrative guidelines therefore (even though there was strong criticism) AQIS couldn’t be held liable because they were working in an environment which required no accountability for the decisions they had made.
2. Decision to allow grapes in from California in a year in which a tenth of California’s crop was destroyed by Pierce’s disease.
3. Disclosure (subsequently admitted) that AQIS had a 50% error factor on its IRA on bananas.
4. Decision to relax restrictions allowing imported peanuts with high cadmium (a deadly poison) levels. To quote the National Party Minister’s explanation “the acceptable cadmium levels were raised to allow Chinese and Texas (US) peanuts into Australia”.
5. Despite receiving strong advice to the contrary from a leading London professor, AQIS decided to allow in cooked chicken meat (bizarrely the justification for this decision relied strongly on this advice).

The beef decision if it is possible, is infinitely worse as it will create a real possibility that people will die.

What level playing field?

The entire argument for importation appears to be based on some 'free trade' ideal to provide a level playing field. This concept seems ludicrous when one considers the tariffs applied to Australian exports by overseas countries, and the subsidies that they provide to their own farmers. In Australia continuous governments have had a no subsidy policy over the last 20 years, during this period OECD average support (subsidy tariff levels) have varied between 37% and 56%.

'Free trade' does not work when Australia is the only country in the world free trading. It is not only the OECD tariffs and subsidies that puts Australia behind the eight-ball, the hygiene, environmental and employment standards required of our beef industry are ridiculously high compared to that required by other countries. So AQIS' green light to importation immediately sets our beef producers and processors at an enormous disadvantage. A truly 'level playing field' would be placing Australia's hygiene, environmental and employment requirements on all countries wishing to export to Australia.

Now we are loosing the only ace that we hold – our disease free status.

AQIS has a continuous record of abject failure. This is a result of the AQIS culture a free trade culture NOT a protection of Australia, its people, its industries and biosphere culture. This culture obliges them to say yes to every application, the interest they serve is the interests of a free market ideology not the interest to protect Australia's disease free status. As sure as the sun rises, a continuation of the policies of AQIS will see our country carrying the same costs and health burdens of all of these foreign diseases.

Australian taxpayers are being forced to bear the burden of the continued failures of AQIS with millions spent to 'mop-up' after each disease outbreak. Taxpayers may also be 'hoodwinked' into buying beef products from countries with a history of BSE without it being stated on the label.

Ultimately taxpayers will have to fork out millions because of continued government policies that have lead to the demise of Australian agriculture. Some seven or so years ago we became a net importer of pork. Four years ago we became a net importer of fruit and vegetables. Two years ago we became a net importer of seafood. No matter what graph one cares to draw, if this continues, somewhere in the next 10 to 25 years, Australia will be a net importer of all food.

Not only is this something that successive Australian governments shall be remembered for in the history books, but they can also have upon their consciences that their policies of deregulation, removal of tariffs and subsidies, and increasing environmental and employment regulations have co-in sided with a situation where one farmer in Australia commits suicide every 4 days.

Either the rest of the world is wrong in their policies and Australia right, or alternatively, the rest of the world is right and successive Australian governments wrong.

Yours sincerely



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