
PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

1.1 Australians face a challenge over the next decade in balancing the forces which impact on their standard of living. In order to prosper as a nation we must lift our production performance while at the same time lower the exploitative nature of progress and development to date.

1.2 This report highlights these forces in the examination of animal welfare issues and concerns associated with the pig, egg and broiler chicken industries. They can best be summed up as follows:

The Government is working to develop a more prosperous Australia, with much better economic performance, improved standards of living, enhanced quality of life, and greater care for our environment. Such human progress can only come from the expansion and more efficient use of our productive capacity - our human skills, capital, technology and natural resources.

Government Statement by John Kerin, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy and Peter Cook, Minister for Resources, May 1989.¹

Shifts in lifestyles and increased disposable incomes have changed what, when and how people eat. People are increasing their demand for convenience, nutrition, variety and quality. ... This is impacting right through the whole agribusiness system i.e. through distributors, processors and traders, to rural producers and the suppliers of their inputs. The implication of these is profound. For example, it must be recognised that consumers do not buy meat as such, but rather a certain cut of a certain kind of meat which has desirable attributes.

These attributes will vary from market to market, and will change over time. A failure to meet those requirements means lower return to producers and all others involved in the system, or no returns at all. It is as simple as that.

Mr Keith Lawson, Managing Director, Elders Pastoral, speaking at the Outlook 90 National Agricultural and Resources Conference.²

I think what you should really be asking for the purposes of investigation of intensive farming is: 'Is this at all a tolerable life for the animals, looking at the life as a whole?'. I believe that if you look at the cases of intensive farming and a life that basically consists of a year to 18 months being crowded into a battery cage and then getting thrown out and killed, or in the cases of a breeding sow, say months on end spent unable to walk around, turn around, socialising in the normal way, simply lying there with nothing to do, then I think that it is pretty clear that that is not a tolerable life for an animal. I think that minimum standards ought to be implemented to make sure that they can have for the duration something that we can regard as a reasonable life to inflict on another creature.

Professor Peter Singer, Vice-President, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies in evidence to Committee, 11 August 1989.³

1.3 Intensive livestock production is an issue which is now on the political agenda of most developed countries around the world. This has occurred because changes over recent decades to livestock husbandry have made farm animal welfare a controversial issue. Although abuse can occur under all systems there is a feeling that the intensification of livestock husbandry has been associated with a deterioration in the welfare of farm animals.

1.4 Prior to the 1960s there was relatively little community interest in, or concern about, the welfare of farm animals apart from the long-held belief that they should be treated humanely. Within 'developed', more affluent societies, however, along with a general awakening and growth of consumerism, environmentalism, naturalism, questioning of materialism and general 'activism' in the 1960s, came a growth in concern about the way animals were being treated and the ethics of animal production methods.

1.5 Specific community concern about the intensification of animal production led the British Government to set up a Technical Committee, Chaired by Professor F.R.W. Brambell, in 1964 to inquire into animal welfare.⁴ There have been other inquiries since then as well as changes to animal welfare laws - notably in Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

Intensive Systems Defined

1.6 There are obviously varying degrees of intensification, but to most people the word 'intensive' implies that the husbandry system is carried out within buildings and involves either the crowding of large groups of animals within restricted spaces, e.g. fattening pigs kept on concrete floored pens and table birds reared in broiler houses, or the confining of one or more animals in small crates, stalls or cages, e.g. crate-reared pigs and laying hens in cages. In most cases the air around the animals is kept within certain temperature and humidity ranges by mechanical devices (i.e. a controlled environment), food and water is usually supplied ad libitum and in many of the systems bedding is not provided (broilers on deep litter floors being the exception to this).⁵

1.7 The food provided is usually of a high nutritional value, and disease levels are kept down by the adoption of high standards of hygiene, by the use of vaccines and, in some cases, by the regular incorporation of antibiotics into the food. Many of the routine tasks, such as the dispensing of food and water and the removal of dung, have been mechanised and it is possible for large numbers of animals to be looked after by a small number of attendants.⁶

1.8 Over the last 30 to 40 years strains of poultry and pigs have been deliberately selected to thrive, i.e. to grow and produce well, in intensive systems. It is presumed that these animals have become adapted to the environmental conditions

imposed on them. The extreme forms of intensive husbandry carried out entirely within buildings and which are independent of the use of the surrounding land have been labelled by some as 'factory farming'.⁷

Benefits of Intensive Husbandry

1.9 The benefits of intensive husbandry, from man's point of view are as follows.

1. The encouragement of maximum production - daily live weight gains and egg yields.
2. Efficient food conversion, due partly to the controlled environment and partly to the improved genetic make-up of the animals.
3. The maximum utilisation of the equipment and buildings.
4. A reduction in the number of workers needed to look after the animals. This factor is possibly the one which brings about the greatest saving in costs.⁸

1.10 Some animals are intensively kept throughout their lives. Table birds, for example, are placed in a broilerhouse as day-old chicks and kept there for the whole of their 12-14 weeks of life only leaving the building on their final journey to the processing works. On the other hand, fattening pigs and laying poultry, with more easily separated stages in their relatively long lives, can have parts of their production regimes intensified, while other parts can be less intensive.⁹

1.11 These separate stages may be carried out on different farms or in different sites on the same farm. It is usual nowadays for the fattening or laying stages to be intensified, but there is an increasing tendency to start intensification earlier.¹⁰

1.12 Obvious benefits for the animals are freedom from malnutrition, vagaries of the weather, and parasitic infestation. Indeed intensive livestock production is undertaken in intensive conditions largely because there is improved control over the environment variables which limit health and productivity. Although significant advances have been made in nutrition, genetics and health, environmental design in animal housing has, until recently, been concerned mainly with climatic control, labour-saving devices and hygiene. Little attention has been paid to the effects of housing on behaviour. In addition the focus of research, innovation and advisory effort over recent decades has been upon controlled environment intensive techniques, which has often affected the rate at which less intensive techniques have been developed.

Welfare Concerns

1.13 The argument advanced by those opposing intensive systems is that close confinement is ill-treatment because it deprives livestock of the opportunity to express physiological and ethological needs and behaviour.

1.14 Opponents are seeking answers to questions about the level of suffering, the amount of fear, the degree of frustration and the severity of pain or discomfort experienced by intensively kept livestock under particular systems or during specific procedures. The industries themselves, and other interested groups and individuals including research scientists are looking for answers to questions about these issues but some are not directly accessible to scientific investigation. These involve an animal's subjective feelings including whether or not it is suffering mentally.

1.15 Animal welfare organisations in Australia acknowledge that any usage of animals by man inevitably involves some degree of restriction on the animal's activities and some modification to its environment. However, they consider that the extreme forms

of intensive husbandry which have evolved in recent years and which restrict movement, space allowance and social contacts raises serious quality of life questions for these food animals.

1.16 Professor Singer, representing the Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, stated in evidence that:

... if one takes the total quantity of suffering that is involved then the greatest animal welfare issue of them all is intensive farming, because of the enormous number of animals involved in it and because of the prolonged duration of the suffering that occurs. Animals in intensive farming are suffering, not just for a few moments or hours or even days, but for months continually; and the numbers of animals involved run into billions, if one looks at it on a world-wide level. Certainly the numbers run into the hundreds of millions in Australia alone.¹¹

1.17 Professor Singer believes that the free market system coupled with modern technology has turned farms into factories and farm animals into commodities¹² and that there are economically viable alternatives to the more extreme intensive livestock production practices.

1.18 Farmers and the industries generally acknowledge the economic pressures on the industry but do not accept that they compromise welfare to the extent claimed by those opposing intensification. They argue that all systems have an impact on the social and physical environment and are concerned about inexperienced observers making judgements based on perceptions rather than knowledge. They are especially critical of arguments which rely on the attributions of human emotions and motives to animals. In short they are concerned that many of the concerns of critics are unfounded, critics ignore welfare aspects of extensive systems, and they propose the adoption of commercially untenable husbandry measures.

1.19 The Australian Pig Industry Policy Council stated in its submission that:

While community concern about animal welfare has been a more recent phenomenon, farmers have for generations generally treated their livestock in a humane and considerate manner.

Good farmers have always been aware that proper animal care and profitability are inexorably linked. To farmers, animal welfare is part and parcel of practical animal husbandry.

The farming community is justifiably suspicious that the more extreme activist groups have an agenda which goes well beyond improved animal welfare and includes not only total vegetarianism for the community but the transformation of society into a classless democracy where the profit motive is replaced with public co-operative ownership. (Social Alternative Vol. 5, (2), pp. 17-20)¹³

1.20 All parties to this inquiry demonstrated a real concern for the welfare of food animals and agreed that the least stressful effective methods of production should be used. At issue is the extent to which welfare is affected by intensified production, the importance of components of the production system most likely to impose suffering, and the ethological needs of the livestock involved.

1.21 So it is generally accepted in Australia that evaluation of intensive systems, processes and practices for livestock production is essential in order to meet the responsibility to remove undue suffering and that these systems can influence behaviour and welfare either through their effects on the animal's social environment or by providing a very artificial physical environment. One of the problems associated with measuring changes in behaviour of a domestic species is in trying to decide what is 'normal' or 'natural'.

1.22 Scientists in Australia, with the support and encouragement of the pig and poultry industries, have been grappling with this problem. It is central to the animal welfare debate and has led researchers to recognise that behavioural research is a major element in establishing objectivity in relationship to the aversiveness of some conditions and practices, and in establishing the validity or otherwise of charges of deprivation levelled at conditions in intensive industries in the case of particular classes of animal.

Conclusion

1.23 Any discussion of animal welfare involves both ethical and practical considerations. Whether improvements can and should be made depends on complex social and biological priorities. Incomplete knowledge about the technical and economic potential of different methods of husbandry compounds the problem. In addition, Australian society is an urban society - the majority of our population live in cities and have had little exposure to animal husbandry in any form - and so there is potential for misunderstanding, for rural romanticisation, and over-reaction.

1.24 An informed debate is now due. It must be Australia based, relevant to Australian conditions, and open to overseas knowledge and experience.

1.25 It cannot take place without at least some answers being found concerning fundamental issues such as:

- whether intensive systems deny the welfare of animals;
- whether animals should be able to undertake particular innate behaviours;

- whether an animal bred and reared in a series of generations really does suffer some sense of deprivation about the things it is denied access to;
- whether the proposed alternative systems can produce the quantity and quality of food that society seems to demand;
- whether they are capable of producing this food at a price society is willing to pay;
- whether the systems have a true welfare advantage for the animals?

ENDNOTES

1. Government Statement by John Kerin, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy and Peter Cook, Minister for Resources, May 1989. Research, Innovation and Competitiveness. Policies for Reshaping Australia's Primary Industries and Energy Portfolios Research and Development, p. 1.
2. K. Lawson, 'International Marketing Strategies for the 1990s - an Australian rural industry perspective', Outlook 90 - National Agricultural and Resources Outlook Conference, Canberra, 30 January-1 February 1990, Session 15, p. 6.
3. Evidence, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 9470.
4. Report of the Technical Committee to Enquire into the Welfare of Animals Kept Under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems, HMSO, London, 1965. That Committee's reference was: To examine the conditions in which livestock are kept under systems of intensive husbandry and to advise whether standards ought to be set in the interests of their welfare, and if so what they should be. (p. 1)
5. Roger Ewbank, MVSc, MRCVS, FIBiol, Director UFAW, 'Alternatives: Definitions and Doubts', in Alternatives to Intensive Husbandry Systems, Proceedings of a Symposium held at Wye College (University of London), Ashford Kent, July 1981, Published by The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, 8 Hamilton Close, South Mimms, Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, p. 5.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*

8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. Evidence, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, 9453.
12. *ibid.*
13. Evidence, Australian Pig Industry Policy Council, p. S8794.