

Statement by the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to the Senate Rural Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry into "Animal Welfare Standards in Australia's Live Export Markets"

10 August 2011

The Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry welcomes the opportunity to appear before the Committee on its enquiries into Animal Welfare Standards in Australia's Live Export Markets.

Prior to the recent temporary suspension of trade of livestock for slaughter to Indonesia, the Department's established role with the live export trade was set out in the November 2006 "Australian Position Statement on the Export of Livestock", which states:

The Australian Government is responsible for export policy, regulation of the live export industry, including licensing livestock exporters, inspection and health and welfare certification of livestock for export, and issuing export permits and health certificates. This includes ensuring exporters, operators of registered premises and accredited veterinarians comply with the Standards. Under its legislation, the Australian Government is also responsible for the development of the Standards, and ensuring the effectiveness of the Standards in achieving their aims of acceptable animal health and welfare outcomes by regular review that involves stakeholders.

The document also states that the "Australian Government's jurisdiction over the animals ceases when disembarkation is complete" and that "After disembarkation, the health and welfare of the livestock is the responsibility of the importer, under the authority of the importing country."

Establishing clear standards around the preparation and shipping of animals as well as the negotiation of Memorandum of Understanding with a number of countries to ensure animals are unloaded on arrival were important elements of this approach.

While recognising this stated role, for a number of years the Australian Government and the Australian industry have been committed to furthering the welfare of livestock post-arrival in importing countries. There have been two main strategies for doing this:

- first, through the development of Regional Animal Welfare Strategies under the auspices of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) in the Middle East and in Asia, the Far East and Oceania which have the potential to improve welfare for all animals in relevant countries; and

- second, through investment in on-the-ground training and infrastructure to improve the conditions for Australian animals exported to these countries through the Live Trade Animal Welfare Program and its predecessor Live Animal Trade Program.

Further, in October 2006, the government of the day signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Egypt agreeing that animals be handled within a “closed loop system” which met OIE animal welfare guidelines. There was no intention signalled at that time to extend such an approach to other markets.

However, in January this year, the Minister wrote to the Australian Livestock Exporters’ Council seeking industry advice on “ways to improve animal welfare outcomes for the live animal trade” and alternative approaches to managing livestock exports, including the possibility of extending a “closed loop system” to other markets.

On 6 July 2011, new orders were signed by the Australian Government regulating the export of livestock to Indonesia. This followed the trade having been suspended on 7 June 2011. Under the new arrangements there is a clear requirement that exporters provide assurances that Australian livestock exported to Indonesia will be managed in a manner consistent with OIE Standards and Guidelines right through to the point of slaughter.

The Government has also initiated investigations into how similar arrangements might be extended to all export markets for Australian livestock, through the establishment of two Industry Government Working Groups to examine cattle to other markets and sheep and goats to all markets. The principles for these investigations include:

- application of OIE standards through the supply chain up to and including the point of slaughter;
- traceability or accounting of animals through the supply chain,
- independent auditing to ensure conformity with requirements; and
- accountability of exporters and public transparency.

The Industry Government Working Groups have been requested to report to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry by 26 August. In parallel, an independent review is also being undertaken by Mr Bill Farmer AO, with this review due to report by 31 August. These processes, in combination, will provide advice to the Government in its considerations of extending the principles which apply to the new arrangements for Indonesia to all markets and all livestock. It is possible that the specific arrangements may vary by market and by species.

As far as we have been able to determine, Australia remains the only country to establish such a far-reaching approach around the care of production animals exported to another country. At the same time, it is recognised that our regulatory reach cannot extend beyond our borders and we must respect the sovereignty of other nations. As such, it will remain important to work closely with our trading partners and to only apply our regulatory measures to Australian exporters.

The Department is very aware that the suspension of the trade to Indonesia has had a significant impact on northern businesses and individuals connected with the trade. The Department has been active in collecting information on this impact, in consultation with State and Territory Governments, industry groups and with those affected. The Government has provided a series of measures to assist those whose employment has been affected as well as various assistance measures to businesses. There will be continuing monitoring of impacts over coming months as the trade rebuilds.

The suspension of trade also had a significant impact on Indonesia, as Australia was the sole supplier of live cattle to the Indonesian market. Following extensive official and Ministerial-level contact, Australian and Indonesian industry is now committed to improving animal welfare outcomes, compatible with OIE standards, in live cattle supply chains. This has been an important outcome to ensure the sustainability of the live cattle trade to Indonesia, and will provide the basis for future cooperation in this important export market.

We would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.

