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Pakistan – more questions need answers.

VALE spokesperson Dr Sue Foster said the latest 4 Corners revelations about the brutal slaughter of over 20,000 Australian sheep in Pakistan raised many more questions than were answered in the program.

The first question is “Why were the sheep rejected by the authorities in Bahrain in the first instance?” The issue should not have been whether the sheep had scabby mouth or whether it was a political rejection, but why the Bahrainis chose not to abide by the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the Australian and Bahrain governments. The MOU was designed to ensure that animals rejected for health reasons would be unloaded from the ship.

The failure of the MOU with Bahrain means that this market cannot be relied on in the future to deal properly with Australian animals. Dr Foster said “This isn’t just an isolated incident with Pakistan as Alison Penfold from the Australian Livestock Exporters Council insists. It is an issue of two importing countries, one of them a regular trading partner.”

The next question is “Why was scabby mouth dismissed as unimportant? In the 4 Corners program, Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Mark Schipp, and the Deputy Secretary of DAFF, Phillip Glyde, both indicated that scabby mouth was not a notifiable or important condition. This may well be true in the strictest sense, but in the context of live export of sheep, it is simply untrue. Firstly, an exporter breaches its live export licence conditions if it allows an animal with signs of scabby mouth to board a live export ship. Secondly, regardless of its veterinary importance, scabby mouth is important to importing countries. It was the reason provided for the Bahrainis for rejection of this shipment and one of the reasons given by the Pakistanis for killing the animals. In addition, the rejection of sheep by Saudi Arabia in 2003 which resulted in nearly 6000 sheep dying in the *Cormo Express* disaster was because the sheep were said to have scabby mouth. Scabby mouth is a highly contagious disease and it is almost impossible to eliminate sheep with sub-clinical scabby mouth from a live export shipment. Consequently, it is inevitable that scabby mouth will occur to some degree in a live export consignment of sheep. Dr Schipp commented that Bahrain had, in the past, accepted shipments of sheep with scabby mouth and this was probably true. But that is not the issue. If scabby mouth is almost inevitable and can be used as an excuse for rejection and ignoring the terms of an

MOU, then surely the conclusion is that export of live sheep from Australia is indeed a very uncertain business and scabby mouth an extremely important disease.

The third question is “Why did the Australian government not liaise appropriately with Pakistan? The programme detailed various infectious diseases that led the Pakistani authorities to order a cull. What was not said, was that a Pakistani ministry report (A Report of Inquiry Committee on the Import of 21,000 diseased Sheep from Australia) clearly states that the feedlot at the importers (partly owned by the Australian exporter Wellard) was not a properly registered quarantine facility. So, not only does it appear that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) have failed to notify the Pakistan Government that the shipment of Australian sheep had been rejected by another country but it also approved the diversion of the export shipment to Pakistan, when the facility did not meet even the most basic quarantine requirement. Imagine the furore if 20,000 potentially diseased sheep were imported into Australia and offloaded at an unauthorised facility.

Dr Foster said “The admission by DAFF that neither they nor Wellard told the Pakistani authorities the sheep had been rejected by Bahrain beggars belief.” The potential damage to diplomatic and trade relationships between Australian and Pakistan is self-evident.

The live export industry has sought to minimise the damage from these revelations by saying it will impose a voluntary ban on the export of Australian sheep to Pakistan. As Australia has in the past several years exported a trivial number of sheep to Pakistan, stopping this will cost the industry nothing. It is concerning that a shipment of breeder cattle, is on its way to Karachi before the dust has even settled on the dead sheep.

Joe Ludwig, the Agriculture Minister, is still repeating his statement that the industry is now much improved by the supply chain assurance system (ESCAS). However, the events reported in this 4 Corners program show that there is still no control over the fate of exported animals. Both Joe Ludwig and Phillip Glyde admitted that there would probably be similar incidents in the future.

The obvious conclusion is that the much-vaunted MOUs and Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS) do not work. In addition, the Australian government appears to be continuing to accommodate the live export of both slaughter and breeder animals from Australia. The rush by DAFF to accommodate Wellard and the live export industry by authorising Pakistan as an approved destination, presumably issuing a new set of export documentation, including a health certificate, but failing to properly ensure that the Pakistani authorities would accept the shipment was a grave oversight, a “quick fix” that went so very wrong and caused suffering of Australian animals on an unimaginable scale.