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MEDIA RELEASE

“Inevitable cruelty” in live export – but is it acceptable cruelty?

Recent footage broadcast on the ABC’s 7.30 Report showing Australian cattle being treated cruelly in an Israeli abattoir¹ has re-ignited debate about whether live export can ever be humane.

An undercover investigation by an Israeli journalist revealed cattle being subjected to inappropriate, repeated and cruel use of electric goads, including applications to the genitals, head and rectum. Downer animals were goaded mercilessly and one was dragged across the concrete by its forelimb by a forklift. The longer footage available on many websites also showed appalling sheep handling and repeated punching of a cow in a crush, unable to escape the blows. Slaughter practices were shocking, with footage revealing careless and incompetent un-stunned slaughter resulting in serious animal cruelty.

Dr Kate Lindsey, VALE’s veterinary behavioural consultant, analysed the ABC footage and said: “The behaviour and appearance of the cattle, such as vocal effort, body language and physical condition of the cattle is consistent with severe psychological and physical stress.”

She noted that some of the animals had long duration vocal communications made up of repeated sequences of variably pitched high-amplitude calls which have the purpose of transmitting signals over long distances to both alert the herd as well as recruiting the support of the herd when a cow is experiencing pain or psychological stress. Other cattle had body movements and/or weaker calls consistent with a state of apathy due to physical and psychological exhaustion.

Dr Lindsey said, “A consistent finding in the footage was that the Downer cows were alone. Cattle are a prey species that form cohesive groups. Being on their own is highly stressful for most cattle.”

The footage also showed many incidences of tail flicking, backward ear position and showing of the whites of the eyes, all behavioural signs consistent with agitation and

¹ 11 December 2012.

distress.”

Dr Lindsey was of the opinion that the facility was highly inappropriate for the slaughter of animals including cattle and that any animal entering the facility would be likely to suffer significantly before its death. She noted other problems with the facility, including the very high noise level and slippery surfaces. The most remarkable thing about the cruelty at this location is that it was audited in July 2012 and approved under the Export Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS).

In a marked reversal, Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig stated that “there will always be incidents of cruelty” in the live export trade and “there was no way to completely guarantee every foreign importer of Australian livestock would not be cruel to the animals.”² This statement comes just over a year after the government said that its new laws “will ensure all cattle, sheep and goats exported overseas will be treated according to international welfare standards.” The reforms were said to “give certainty to the community who made it clear they want better welfare standards.”³ Indeed the Minister went further at the time, saying cruelty in importing countries was not acceptable to him, the community, or producers.⁴

This not-so-subtle shift in stance illustrates what VALE has always known: that it is impossible for the Australian Government to impose welfare standards on importing countries. Even if audits show that an overseas abattoir is performing well at the time the audit is done, there is every reason to believe that bad welfare standards recur once the auditor is gone. Indeed, a worker at the Israeli abattoir where the latest cruelty took place said that after the Australian audit had occurred, there was no violence inflicted on the animals for a couple of weeks, but then cruel and violent practices started again, because they were the only way to ensure the processing chain moved fast enough.⁵

The Australian Government has now acknowledged in essence that it cannot protect Australian animals once they leave our shores, and has illustrated that there is a two-tier animal welfare system in place. The first tier is the high standards imposed locally, by our own animal welfare laws, while the second tier is the “inevitable” cruelty to Australian animals in importing countries. Presumably that overseas cruelty, contrary to the Government’s earlier claims, is now also “acceptable”, because if it is not acceptable, why are we still exporting live animals to be subjected to this cruelty?

The rather surreal approach of Minister Ludwig and the government was highlighted further when they made the statement that people who were aware of such cruelty happening overseas should immediately report it to the “independent regulator”. The

² *The Australian* 13 December 2012.

³ Senator Joe Ludwig: speech on 21 October 2011.

⁴ Senator Joe Ludwig interviewed on ABC *Landline*, 12 June 2011.

⁵ “Israeli dairy giant Tnuva faces criminal probe for alleged animal abuse” *Haaretz* 9 December 2012.

self-proclaimed “independent regulator” is none other than the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), the same organisation that vigorously supports and promotes live export. VALE spokesperson Dr Sue Foster said, “A cynic might suggest that DAFF is now describing itself as the ‘independent regulator’ because it is under threat by the Labor Party caucus vote to consider establishing an independent regulator.”

In a bizarre twist, it may be that the imposition of the much-criticised ESCAS could have a real benefit for the welfare of exported Australian animals. For years, despite the evidence, the Government simply denied there was a problem and did nothing, because it was out of the Government’s control (they described the industry as “self-regulating”). Now that the Government is saying that it can control what happens to Australian animals in importing countries with ESCAS, it has taken the lid off Pandora’s box because it cannot stop the monitoring and reporting by truly independent animal welfare investigators who access these facilities. There is little doubt that these revelations will continue, and as they do, the Government will be further backed into the position of having to admit that the cruelty really is beyond their control. And that is when the word “unacceptable” may come to mean just that.

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