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MEDIA RELEASE

HIGH MORTALITY VOYAGE EXPOSES THE MYTHS

In July 2016, Emanuel Exports Pty Ltd had an extreme mortality event, with 3027 sheep (4.36%) dying on the *Al Messilah*, from Fremantle to the Middle East. Heat stress was the major factor.

Dr Sue Foster, spokesperson for Vets Against Live Export (VALE) says analysis of this voyage exposes a number of industry myths including the adequacy of space allowance for animals.

“It is clear that the current space requirements prescribed by the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock (ASEL) are insufficient to prevent suffering and death from heat stress. The *Al Messilah* voyage had roughly 10% extra space even before leaving Fremantle, and the sheep were spread out inside the ship even further during the voyage and after some animals were unloaded at destination ports. Whilst this may have helped, it did nothing to avert the catastrophe.”

The inadequacy of current space allowances in the Middle East summer was inadvertently acknowledged in the report. The ship’s veterinarian commented that when transiting through the Gulf at this time of year, the usual practice is to open the gates of various pens to allow access to alleyways and ramps to give sheep more space.

“It is obvious that the current legal space requirements are inadequate during Middle East summers. It follows that the government’s Heat Stress Risk Assessment for these voyages is also flawed.

Foster highlights that the surviving sheep on the *Al Messilah* voyage gained weight. “The industry claims shipboard weight gain as proof of good animal welfare. Clearly, a high mortality voyage with heat stress recorded on all but five of the 23 days and over 4% sheep mortality is not a voyage where animal welfare has been acceptable, let alone good. Some of these sheep will have panting for 14 days straight, yet the survivors managed to put on weight. Weight gain is not an accurate single measure of animal welfare onboard ship.”

Under ASEL, sheep selected for live export shipment should be fit and healthy to load yet Foster noted sheep were hospitalised for “illthrift”, “flystrike” and “shearing sequel” on Day 1 of the *Al Messilah* voyage.”

“As for the industry claim about improvements to ships, the *Al Messilah*, one of the industry’s most regular ships to the Middle East, is a converted car carrier, built in 1980 with closed decks. During this voyage, ventilation was reported as normal. Despite this, there was over 70-80% humidity (depending on deck) from Day 1 with humidity on the decks ranging from 1-52% higher than the external environment. The Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and Resources (DAWR) response was to recommend that industrial fans be installed on the vessel.”

“Fans do not lower humidity or wet bulb temperatures. This response is farcical” says Foster

“The industry’s current heat stress thresholds for sheep and cattle (defined in high mortality voyage reports as the maximum wet bulb temperatures at which body temperature can be controlled using available mechanisms of heat loss) are not supported by evidence from best-case experimental models where animals are penned individually, optimally ventilated

and provided with more space. Ethics committees for research projects would likely not approve ASEL space allowances!”

The Keniry Enquiry (2004) recommended “exports should be banned in circumstances where the available evidence indicates that the risks of adverse outcomes are predictably high. Less than three years before this voyage, 4179 sheep (5.53%) died on the Bader and heat crashes on voyages to the middle East summer have occurred reasonably regularly since being identified by veterinary researcher Dr Andrew Kelly in the 1990s.

Dr Foster added, “The Department’s own records including shipboard performance and high mortality voyage reports all identify the significantly increased risk of transporting animals during the Middle East summer. Increased space does not mitigate the issue. This is unacceptable, these voyages should cease immediately.”

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For information contact Dr Sue Foster on 0423 783 689, info@vale.org.au