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## Media release

### Importers of Australian cattle complain about breaches of live export standards

The imposition by the Australian Government of standards purporting to ensure the welfare of exported Australian animals in destination countries has had the unexpected consequence of importers complaining that standards are not being met.

Vets Against Live Export (VALE) discussed this with veterinarian Dr Lloyd Reeve-Johnson of Pacific Animal Consulting and Agribusiness, who was recently asked by Animals Australia to visit Mauritius to report on the status of cattle exported from Australia to Mauritius on the MV *Barkly Pearl* in October 2012. Animals Australia became aware of the voyage and its associated animal welfare problems when they were approached by the Mauritian importer. The exporter was Australian company South East Asian Livestock Services.

Dr Reeve-Johnson told VALE that his investigation in Mauritius revealed serious problems with the shipment and potentially misleading paperwork. He also raised concerns about the capacity of Mauritian slaughter facilities to comply with the OIE recommendations sought to be imposed by Australian live export law.

The main reason the importer contacted Animals Australia was that a significant number of the imported cattle were pregnant thus unacceptable to the Mauritian slaughterhouse – Mauritian import requirements stipulate that cattle should not be pregnant. According to Australian live export standards, cattle sourced for export as slaughter animals must have been determined not to be pregnant by testing no more than 30 days before export and certified by the registered veterinarian or pregnancy tester. The Australian Certificate of Health signed by an AQIS-approved veterinarian obtained by Animals Australia states that none of the female cattle were pregnant at the time of export. This was clearly not true. Dr Reeve-Johnson established that two calves were born during the voyage (killed and thrown overboard but not noted in the onboard veterinarian's report), four cows were found to be pregnant at slaughter, and nine cows which died in the feedlot in the first week after unloading were also found to be pregnant. An Australian veterinarian sent in by the exporter reportedly told the importer that at least 80 further cows and heifers were pregnant before allegedly refusing to examine further cattle. Dr Reeve-Johnson personally confirmed the presence of obviously pregnant cattle in the feedlot and noted cows from the shipment with young calves at foot. This is a major breach of the live export standards and raises serious questions about the adequacy of the pregnancy-testing regime in Australia.

VALE spokesperson Dr Sue Foster said: “The issue of pregnant cattle being exported on live export ships has been emerging as a significant welfare issue in AQIS mortality investigation reports over the last few years. However, this is the first time that independent investigation and veterinary inspection has confirmed the potential extent of the problem.”

A further problem identified by Dr Reeve-Johnson was that while the onboard veterinarian reported to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) that there had been 18 deaths during the voyage, it appears that the ship’s captain reported to Mauritian authorities there were no mortalities during the voyage and two deaths during discharge. The senior veterinary official in Mauritius noted that there was a discrepancy of 18 cattle between those reportedly carried on the ship (2061) and those unloaded (2043), and demanded an explanation. Under-reporting mortalities to importing country authorities is a practice which has been going on for at least a decade and live export industry participants in Australia are aware of that. Despite this, DAFF has done nothing to stop this practice.

Other serious issues identified by Dr Reeve-Johnson include the presence of emaciated Australian cattle in the Mauritian feedlot, a large number of cattle dying in the feedlot (about 60), and evidence that the onboard veterinarian ran out of appropriate veterinary drugs, including antibiotics, well before the end of the voyage.

Documents obtained by Dr Reeve-Johnson also indicate that while there was an AQIS approved veterinarian (AAV) on board the ship, it is likely that there was no stockman. Australian live export standards require that all live export ships carry a stockman. However, it is not known whether AQIS imposed a requirement for an AAV to be on this ship, or whether the exporter hired a veterinarian to act as a stockman.

Dr Foster said: “AQIS exercises its discretion as to whether vets are required on long voyages such as this one so it is difficult to know whether a veterinarian was actually required for this voyage. Is it possible that AQIS, even when requiring a veterinarian to be on board, is quietly allowing the exporter to dispense with the legal requirement for a stockman?”

Finally, Dr Reeve-Johnson had extensive discussions with Mauritian authorities and discovered that though Mauritian slaughter facilities (which commonly include roping and casting of animals and home slaughter) were not likely to comply with the new live export regulations, there had been no input from, or inspection of, facilities by Australian representatives. The Divisional Veterinary Officer in charge of monitoring the abattoir told Dr Reeve-Johnson that there had been no visit by an Australian official for at least two years. This is despite the fact that as of 1 January 2013, Mauritian facilities are required to be approved under the Export Supply Chain Assurance Program (ESCAS).

Dr Reeve-Johnson pointed out to VALE that this was not the first time that export of cattle to Mauritius on board the *Barkly Pearl* had been associated with unacceptable animal welfare. As recently as April 2012, the South African investigative program “Carte Blanche” reported on horrendous conditions during a cattle export voyage from East London. Animals were seen lying in substantial quantities of faeces, and being brutalised during offloading. The program reported that the South African National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NSPCA) inspected the *Barkly Pearl* at loading and unloading of the cattle. NSPCA inspectors concluded that carriage of animals on the lower decks of this ship would result in unacceptably poor animal welfare caused not only by accumulation of faeces but also by high ammonia levels. NSPCA recommended that these decks should not be used for animal transport. A South African government official was reported as saying that voyages longer than seven days would no longer be approved.

Dr Reeve-Johnson commented that one of the most alarming features of this episode is that despite assurances to the contrary by DAFF, there was no clear documentary record of events, meaning that there were discrepancies at each stage between numbers of pregnant animals, births and mortalities.

Dr Foster said: “Proper documentation, an indispensable requirement of live export, has often been lacking. Now that DAFF has put the ESCAS in place, it is obvious that they should be monitoring record-keeping even more rigorously and imposing severe penalties for failure to provide proper documentary records for a live export voyage.

“This is yet another live export voyage which has gone badly wrong, with problems which should have been reported by the onboard veterinarian. It once again illustrates the obvious need for veterinary supervision by veterinarians who are completely independent of the exporter.”

Animals Australia has demanded that DAFF conduct an urgent inquiry into this voyage. They told VALE that DAFF has now required the exporter to install a Mark IV restraining box at the Mauritian slaughterhouse.

Dr Foster said: “DAFF has repeatedly demonstrated it is out of touch with the reality in importing countries, with revelations by Animals Australia forcing it to do what it should have done long ago. To have this happen just before ESCAS approval is required for Mauritius illustrates that the ESCAS is unworkable, and that the animal welfare problems associated with these longer voyages are probably insurmountable.

“The demonstrated prevalence of rope slaughter in Mauritius, which would be unacceptable even under the minimal OIE recommendations, shows that it is highly unlikely that there will be compliance with ESCAS requirements. DAFF should refuse to authorise any further shipments to Mauritius until its own officers have been able to verify the adequacy of animal welfare standards in this country and on this ship.”

*ENDS*

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