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MEDIA RELEASE

Heat stress deaths predictable and inevitable

The deaths of over 4000 sheep due to heat stroke during a live export voyage to the Middle East in 2013 shows that there is a significant risk of heat stress and that the government is prepared to accept these high mortalities.

Dr Sue Foster, spokesperson for Vets Against Live Export (VALE), said, “Our recent peer-reviewed scientific paper in *The Veterinary Journal* predicted exactly this sort of disaster. It showed that the model the Department of Agriculture (DAFF) uses to try to reduce the risk of heat stress deaths underestimates the effects on animals of high temperatures and humidity experienced on voyages to the Middle East in the northern summer. High mortality ‘heat crashes’ in May to August in the Middle East have been reported for at least 20 years. The claim made by the exporter that the conditions experienced were unusual is not supported by examination of the historical meteorological data for Doha.”

Dr Foster noted that a Federal Court case against DAFF last year heard evidence that overstocking of animals aboard live export vessels was a routine event. “DAFF has known for years that exporters routinely overstock live export ships with animals. This deliberate overcrowding means animals are at a greater risk of heat stress, as the ventilation systems cannot get rid of heat generated by the animals.”

DAFF’s response to the incident was to ensure more space per animal on the next voyage, but Dr Foster points out that this was irrational.

“Firstly, the next voyage was in November 2013 when wet bulb temperatures are around 20°C and the risk of heat stress is minimal. Secondly, under the extreme conditions on the ship in August, even extra space would not have helped. If the combination of high temperature and high humidity is such that the animals cannot cool down, they will still suffer and die,” she said.

“This disaster confirms that long-haul live export voyages to the Middle East during May to August are too risky to be allowed to continue, and demonstrates that DAFF is unable or unwilling to ensure that animal welfare is not compromised. VALE is calling for a cessation of all voyages to the Middle East between May and August.”

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