



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry

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February 2025

Dr Sue Foster
Spokesperson
Vets Against Live Export
Via email: info@vale.org.au

Dear Dr Foster

Thank you for your correspondence of 16 January 2025 regarding your concerns with the independent observer (IO) program.

Firstly, as the regulator of live animal exports, the department takes its responsibilities seriously. There are several observations in your letter of alleged inappropriate conduct by the department. I politely ask for the specific details of the conduct where you consider public officials have acted dishonestly or in a biased way so that we can understand the full scope of the claims being made.

Regarding IOs, they are only one part of the department's assurance for livestock exports. The department also receives mandatory reporting from accredited stockpersons and veterinarians on voyages by sea, and reports from the master of the vessel, to assist with our regulation of the livestock export trade. For voyages meeting deployment criteria but not accompanied by an IO, additional reporting may be required which includes footage and comments on specific animal health and welfare outcomes.

I understand VALE's concern about there being several IO reports currently unpublished. The department has set obligations in relation to how it makes information public, and this publication process has been under review. Until the review is complete, several reports will continue to be unpublished. Of the IO summary reports that have yet to be published, none of them indicate that there were any critical issues observed during the relevant voyages.

I can assure VALE that corrective actions resulting from the reports of IOs, but more often from other sources of information, are taken in accordance with the risk posed and independent from the publication of reports. Examples of the types of corrective actions we do take include:

- Requiring amendments to processes in exporter Approved Arrangements;
- Seeking additional information about a consignment prior to export approval;
- Increasing the level of inspection and verification activities at the registered establishment and on the vessel;
- Applying conditions to an exporter's licence, for example requiring a shipboard veterinarian to accompany a consignment, or requiring a respiratory disease management plan to be enacted;
- Directions to provide additional reporting to verify export activities and compliance on future voyages

You may be aware that the then Inspector General of Animal Welfare and Live Animal Exports (IGAWLAE), Dr Michael Bond, made recommendations in relation to the IO program in his August 2024 review. The department is now working towards implementation of those recommendations.

The comments reported to VALE by an accredited veterinarian are concerning. Equally we cannot act on hearsay. To ensure we can assess and where appropriate address the issues raised, we encourage the shipboard veterinarian to contact us directly. Alternatively, the department provides a dedicated whistleblower hotline (1800 319 595) as a free call service for people to confidentially report information on bad practices in livestock export and suspected breaches of export conditions.

We note that some information you are seeking is 'protected information' under the *Export Control Act 2020* and accordingly it cannot be disclosed. We would, however, be happy to have a meeting with you to discuss your concerns. A member of my team will reach out in the coming weeks to organise a suitable time.

Thanks again for taking the time to raise your concerns with us.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. McDonald". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Andrew McDonald
First Assistant Secretary
17 February 2025