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MEDIA RELEASE

A repeat of the *Cormo Express*?

A shipment of about 20,000 sheep exported by Wellard from Fremantle on 4 August aboard the *Ocean Drover* was rejected on 21 August on the grounds that the sheep had scabby mouth. The ship then sailed on to Kuwait, where it appears no animals were unloaded; it then returned to Bahrain, arriving on 29 August, where it remains. It seems the 20,000 rejected animals are still on board.

A shipment of about 50,000 sheep exported from Fremantle by Perth company Emanuel Exports on the *Al Shuwaikh* was also rejected for unloading in Bahrain for scabby mouth on about 24 August. The ship sailed on to Kuwait, where the shipment was also initially rejected. (It is now believed that the Kuwaiti government has approved the unloading of the sheep.)

Is this the *Cormo Express* all over again?

Spokesperson for VALE, Dr Sue Foster, said “The concern is that sheep on both ships were sourced from southern latitudes in an Australian winter and will be subjected to prolonged heat stress while this stand-off continues. Sheep have now been on the *Ocean Drover* for more than a month. The average daily temperatures in Bahrain are currently forecast to be up to 39 degrees Celsius. The overnight temperatures will not fall below 31 degrees Celsius and humidity will be up to 60%. Even in much milder shipboard conditions, such sheep exhibit signs of heat stress including sustained respiration rates of 100–120 breaths per minute.”

In 2003, nearly 6,000 sheep died on the *Cormo Express* after the sheep were rejected by Saudi Arabian vets who claimed the animals were suffering from scabby mouth. In response, the Keniry Inquiry was set up by the government to identify measures that would prevent the animal welfare disasters that inevitably follow rejection of live export shipments in the Middle East.

The Australian government did not follow the key recommendation, namely, that a quarantine facility be established in the Middle East so that shipments of animals that had been rejected could be swiftly unloaded from the ship. Instead, the government put in place Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the major Middle Eastern importing countries, in an attempt to ensure that animals would be unloaded in the importing country regardless of their state of health. The MOUs

aimed to prevent animals being kept on board ship in extremely adverse conditions until their fate was resolved.

In addition to the MOUs, other post-Keniry arrangements include that live exporters are legally bound to have contingency arrangements in place to care for animals in the event a shipment is rejected and must inspect animals pre-export to ensure they are free from disease and any other condition rendering them unfit for transport by sea, including scabby mouth. However, rejections for scabby mouth are somewhat inexplicable in countries that have foot and mouth disease and it is likely that rejection in the importing countries is political. In conclusion, neither the exporter's legally-required contingency plans nor the non-binding MOUs have been effective in preventing rejection of large numbers of animals and putting their welfare at risk.

“This incident underlines the fundamentally flawed regulatory framework which the Government has constructed for live export. As Wellard have been at pains to emphasise, as soon as the sheep are on the ship they belong to the importer. It is naïve to suggest that Australian legislation could or would be applied to an importer in a foreign country. Equally, how could an Australian court hold an exporter responsible for cruelty to animals which belong to a foreign country?” said Dr Foster.

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