



28th September 2012

MEDIA RELEASE

LIVE EXPORT HEADING FOR THE ROCKS

Vets Against Live Export (VALE) says that the latest news of 10,000 Australian sheep being brutally killed by Pakistani authorities is yet another indication that the whole live export system is failing. In 2004, after the *Cormo Express* incident when Saudi Arabia rejected a shipment of 55,000 sheep, the Australian government changed legislation and set up Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with some importing countries. After revelations of cruelty to Australian animals in Indonesia last year, the Australian government again tried to impose legal measures to protect exported animals. The Export Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS), which allocated \$5 million of taxpayer money directly to the exporters, was set up in an attempt to ensure that Australian animals are treated properly in importing countries.

Both the MOUs and ESCAS have now failed Australian sheep. A shipment of 22,000 sheep exported from Fremantle at the beginning of August on the MV *Ocean Drover* by export licence holder Wellard was rejected 33 days later by Bahrain, which claimed the sheep had “scabby mouth”. The MOU between the Australian and Bahrain governments requires the Bahrain government to offload any rejected animals into quarantine facilities. Clearly, Bahrain did not comply with that agreement. This is the first time that an MOU has been tested and the Bahraini response indicates that MOU system has failed.

Subsequent events have demonstrated that the ESCAS also failed. Wellard and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) reported that the rejected sheep were being shipped to Pakistan, with an ESCAS in place. This is surprising, given there is no MOU with Pakistan, it is not on DAFF’s list of destinations with an approved ESCAS, and contrary to Wellard’s claims of a long-established record of exporting animals to Pakistan, they have made only one shipment to Pakistan since records became publicly available in 2005.

The ESCAS should have ensured that sheep are handled and slaughtered according to the (minimal) recommendations of the OIE. There is also a

separate legal requirement for the exporter to have a contingency plan covering rejection of the animals by Pakistan. It appears that neither protection mechanism worked. The Pakistani authorities rejected the animals, claiming that the sheep were infected with a variety of diseases (including foot and mouth disease, scabby mouth, salmonellosis and anthrax) and commenced a brutal cull. Wellard representatives were excluded from the feedlot whilst the sheep were reportedly clubbed and stabbed to death with some buried alive.

Since its inception, ESCAS has been breached in Indonesia and possibly Kuwait. To date, no sanctions have followed. VALE's legal adviser, Dr Malcolm Caulfield says "this is hardly surprising as arguably, breach of the ESCAS system does not actually allow the imposition of serious legal sanctions, contrary to the Department's claims".

Wellard is already in damage control, with its Managing Director, Steve Meerwald telling the ABC today that the events in Pakistan happened despite Wellard's best efforts. Dr Caulfield said "I think this illustrates that the ESCAS can never be enforced, because claiming events happen beyond your control will be a very good legal defence. All the ESCAS system requires is that an exporter declares they will make best efforts."

Spokesperson for VALE, Dr Sue Foster said: "The Australian government has consistently claimed that their MOUs would prevent animals being kept on ships while disputes about health are resolved. They didn't. They have trumpeted the ESCAS as ensuring adequate animal welfare at the end destination. It hasn't. This latest animal welfare disaster provides the most comprehensive example that there is nothing Australia can do to provide adequate protection for Australian animals once they board an export ship. "

It seems that the exporters are acknowledging that the situation is becoming desperate with two exporters (Wellard and Jordanian-owned LSS) recently buying West Australian abattoirs. In addition, AACo, one of the largest producers of cattle for live export, has just announced that construction of its new Northern Territory abattoir (which will have a throughput of 200,000 head per year) will start within the month. Dr Foster said "The industry sees the writing on the wall even if the government can't. It really is time that the government acknowledges that the situation is untenable and takes active steps to phase out this trade, providing assistance whilst it is replaced by local processing."

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