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To The Editor

Sheep Central

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Dear Terry

WA Farmers’ Jeff Murray wouldn’t be fooling many sheep farmers with his latest rant and baseless accusations about the RSPCA. They won’t be misled again with false assurances that everything’s fixed in the live sheep trade.

Mr Murray defies logic by criticising RSPCA opposition to the recent granting of an export licence to Rural Exports and Trading WA (RETWA) and appears to be suggesting that anyone who supports agriculture must automatically support the live sheep trade. The RSPCA is certainly opposed to RETWA’s licence approval and the decision to water down new animal welfare requirements made by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources this month. Here are the real reasons why.

In response to the public outrage about the Awassi Express horror voyages in April, Federal Minister David Littleproud pledged a range of animal welfare improvements, including removing the bad operators. Now, just a few months later, what we are seeing from the Federal Government are broken promises through new regulations that are so weak they will do almost nothing to improve sheep welfare.

Following the Awassi debacle, Minister Littleproud said he would weed out the bad operators from the industry. He said at the time: "Personally, I'd like to see company directors be held more personally accountable if they do the wrong thing, facing big fines and possible jail time. They shouldn't be able to hide behind companies and shelf companies.

"I want to let the light shine in.”

Now, letting the light shine in apparently means granting a licence to an exporter with strong connections to Emanuel Exports and an equally horrendous track record on mass animal mortalities. In 2004, RETWA had its export licence cancelled by former Agriculture Minister Warren Truss following a string of 25 high mortality voyages within a two-year period between 2000 and 2002.

In granting the new export licence, the Federal Government says a 17.5% reduction in stocking densities will apply on board, a move that Mr Murray says should “satisfy any reasonable person.”

But, the reduction of just 17.5% goes against the advice of the Australian Veterinary Association which is that live sheep exports to the Middle East between May and October should not take place due to the extremes of temperatures in the northern summer and, for the rest of the year, a stocking reduction of up to 28% should be applied.

The RSPCA is most definitely not satisfied with the mere 17.5% reduction which means only half the sheep can lie down at any one time during the three to four-week voyage. This was admitted by the Department of Agriculture at the Senate Estimates earlier this month. The majority of Australians, including many sheep farmers, would not be satisfied with knowing sheep have to timeshare their lying down time or resort to lying on top of each other for almost a month at sea.

The Government also pledged independent observers would be on all live sheep export voyages to monitor animal welfare conditions and report directly to the Federal regulator. Another broken promise. Now, we are told independent observers will only be on board if there is room for them.

The on-board independent observers were crucial to maintaining public confidence in live exports after it was found the extent of the suffering and death of sheep in appalling conditions on Emanuel Exports voyages had been seriously downplayed in reports to the Federal regulator.

Independent public opinion surveys have shown the vast majority of Australians want live sheep exports to end and this opinion was similar across people polled in regional and well as city locations. The support for ending live sheep exports increases to around 8 in every 10 Australians if government assistance is available to help sheep farmers exit the industry.

It is also a fact that not all sheep farmers in WA support live exports. This was obvious at the Katanning rally organised by WA Farmers in July. At that event, several sheep farmers spoke up against live exports suggesting there are other types of agribusiness in WA that should be encouraged and promoted.

Of course, WA Farmers is hopelessly conflicted with its leadership heavily involved in the live sheep trade and unable to effectively represent farmers who aren’t part of that.

It is the role of RSPCA to prevent animal cruelty and to advocate for the application of the most up to date animal welfare science. Mortality rates, upon which Mr Murray bases his assurances, haven’t been used to measure animal welfare for decades. Relying on the dubious assertion that an animal’s welfare must be good simply because it didn’t die is precisely the reason the live sheep trade finds itself in the predicament it is in today. We’d rather rely on the advice of the Australian Veterinary Association. It is not the role of the RSPCA to support industries that are inherently cruel to animals involved. The live sheep trade is one of those industries.

We know the vast majority of farmers treat their animals humanely and believe good animal welfare is good for farming. Many of those farmers will just be getting on with running their farms, paying no attention to Mr Murray’s attacks on the RSPCA and anyone else who speaks up about the cruelty in the live sheep trade.

Yours sincerely,



Lynne Bradshaw AM

Chair