

LIVE EXPORT — FEDERAL GOVERNMENT POLICY

Grievance

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [9.24 am]: My grievance today is addressed to the Premier; Minister for Federal–State Relations, but I thank the Minister for Regional Development for taking my grievance. I ask that the Premier act immediately to support the live export sheep industry in Western Australia by openly rejecting federal Labor’s policy to phase out live sheep exports. The federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has announced that his government is committed to ending the industry, but that it will take place in the next term of Parliament to give farmers and exporters time to prepare for the transition away from live sheep exports by sea. An independent transition panel headed by Phillip Glyde, but stacked with a former animal rights campaigner and a retired Labor member of Parliament and with only one Western Australian member, has since been appointed to advise the federal government on how to shut down the export of live sheep from Australia.

I acknowledge that the Premier has recognised industry improvements. The Premier has been clear that the current measures, including the northern summer live export ban, are sufficient, and other measures, including additional veterinarian checks and onboard monitoring, have worked well and are effective and appropriate at this time. We have consistently asked the Premier to prove his support for the industry in this place several times, and in the other place, but the answer that comes back is the same almost every time: he acknowledges the changes that have been made. We now need to see an actual demonstration of his support by rejecting the proposed ban publicly and vocally. According to the ABC online news on 7 March —

The federal government is pushing ahead with its plan to ban live sheep exports, despite fierce resistance from industry and the WA Labor government.

We are yet to see this fierce resistance from the WA Labor government, but there is a collective hope that we will see it soon. There was hope that the member for South West Region as the newly appointed Minister for Agriculture and Food would support the live sheep export industry instead of pushing a hidden animal activist agenda like the former minister did. The current minister in fact came out in support of the industry in the other house when she said on 14 February in *Hansard* —

The McGowan government supports the continuation of the live sheep export industry.

But by March she was quickly fading in her resolve and backing down under pressure from the Albanese government, and perhaps even the Premier. Now the minister’s stance, as reported by the ABC on 3 March 2023, is sadly that “farmers need to face a future without live sheep exports”. To say the industry is disappointed is an understatement. Australia’s live sheep export industry employs more than 3 000 people in Western Australia and is worth \$136 million. The Premier and his ministers cannot ignore the value of this industry to the WA economy and its importance to thousands of Western Australian families comprising not only farmers, but also feed suppliers and manufacturers, shearers, truck drivers, veterinarians, livestock agents, wool agents, exporting companies and more.

The Livestock Collective says that in the absence of live sheep exports, there is insufficient sheep processing abattoir capacity in WA to support the production capacity of the WA sheep flock. As the major state supplying the live export trade, stopping exports would result in a price reduction for WA farmers, a downturn in wool production and a rapid decline in sheep numbers. A letter that was sent to the Premier on 27 March, representing 28 peak state farming bodies, shearers, transporters, woolgrowers and exporters, called for the Premier to not waver in the face of pressure from Canberra. The letter clearly states that this Labor policy is not about only banning live sheep exports; it is not only a livestock export issue, but also a whole-of-sector issue. The letter called on the Premier to stand together with industry and reject this ban now.

Australian Livestock Exporters’ Council chief executive officer Mark Harvey-Sutton said the fight to keep the live sheep trade was not over and that the federal government’s actions and policy to end the trade set an alarming precedent for all agricultural industries. If the Premier truly supported the industry, he would be sending himself and delegations to fight for WA in the face of the Prime Minister in Canberra. He should not be bullied by the Albanese government, bowing to the powers of an under-informed minister and the federal Labor agenda. The Liberals and the Nationals WA, both state and federal, are standing up and backing this industry. It is time for the Premier to step up to the plate and join the fight for this industry. A petition that I lodged this morning received well over 2 000 signatures and reflects the number of worried supporters and producers across the supply chain. At the Wagin Woolorama our tent was overwhelmed by people signing the petition in support but also inundated by people raising concerns about their livelihood if the industry is banned.

The federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry came out and said the federal government wants to support the live cattle industry grow and prosper but shut down the live sheep export industry. After cattle exports were shut down overnight in 2011, the industry was given the opportunity to reform, and reform it did—well above what was expected and well above international standards. The cattle industry was given an opportunity to reform

and return to live exports, but devastated sheep producers and exporters in WA have not been provided with the same opportunity.

The proposed ban will, effectively, decrease animal welfare standards internationally as our export partners in the Middle East replace our sheep with those from other countries like Somalia, Sudan and Jordan. These countries care only about the number of sheep they can fit on a ship or in a truck. They do not monitor ventilation or stocking densities. The sheep have limited access to veterinary care. They do not measure wool length or the weight or the condition of sheep.

Banning the live export of sheep will also jeopardise the trade in grain and feed supplies across the sector. The shipping companies have lost confidence in WA, not because of falling sheep numbers but because of the lack of confidence in the industry thanks to Murray Watt and federal Labor.

Without the definitive backing of this industry by the Premier against his federal counterparts, the number of sheep leaving on ships will continue to fall. The sheep price will fall and farmers will be faced with no other choice but to get out of sheep farming altogether. Now is the time for the Premier to join the whole livestock export sector Australia-wide and reject federal Labor's plan to ban live sheep export.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Regional Development) [9.31 am]: I thank the member for his grievance this morning. The Premier, along with the wider state government, has been consistent in his position on the live export trade. We have publicly stated on countless occasions that the current rules are appropriate. When high-profile issues arose in 2017 and 2018, and they were high profile, the state government called for better standards that would allow live sheep export to continue. Our position on live export is clear: we support the continuation of the live sheep trade outside the northern summer period by reputable operators, on modern ships with a credible and transparent regulatory regime. This includes additional vet checks and monitoring. All reports that we receive suggest that these measures have worked well. We have always worked closely with the WA sheep industry to build more resilience for farmers and the entire supply chain and to ensure that this important industry thrives into the future. That support has been unwavering.

In May last year, a policy was taken to the federal election and the new government now has a mandate to implement that policy. It is a federal government policy. It is important to note that the Prime Minister has advised that the phase-out will not take effect until the next term of government, so after 2025. It is also important to note that this government continued to make its position clear after that election commitment was made and has been unequivocal since the new federal government was elected. This fact has been recognised across the industry. Industry stakeholders including WAFarmers and the Pastoralists and Graziers Association have commended the McGowan government's advocacy on this issue.

Tony Seabrook, president of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association of WA said —

“Both the Premier and our WA ag minister have come out of this smelling of roses, they have not in any way sold us down the drain ...

John Hassell, president of WAFarmers, said of Minister Jarvis —

“She ... can only do so much. I still hold Jackie in high regard ... it's a Federal Government decision.”

John Cunnington, chair of the Western Australian Livestock Exporters' Association said —

“For the Premier and the new Agriculture Minister to actually come out supporting the live sheep trade has been fantastic ...

Those comments are out there. Yesterday, in the other place, Hon Steve Martin said —

I support the policy position of Hon Jackie Jarvis, Minister for Agriculture and Food, on this very important industry.

Hon Colin de Grussa said —

I endorse the minister's support for this industry, and I also endorse the Premier's support for this industry. I look forward to continued advocacy for the Western Australian live sheep industry and the continuation of this important sector.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Members!

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is quite clear that the National Party members in the other place are listening and supporting the WA government's position. I am not so sure about this place. Maybe there needs to be a few conversations between members of the National Party in this place and members of the National Party in the other place.

Mark Harvey-Sutton, CEO of the Australian Livestock Exporters' Council said —

“I think the message that industry collectively needs to send to Minister Jarvis is that we have your back in taking this to Canberra ...

“She’s already indicated she’s taken the fight to Canberra. Minister, we are very happy for you to continue to do so, and we will be supporting you every step of the way.

The state government’s position is unequivocal. But in the meantime the federal Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry consultation process is underway, and local opposition to the policy should not be a reason to exclude ourselves from the discussion. In the previous government, I know that National Party members used to frequently walk out of cabinet when they disagreed, and cut themselves off from the debate. That is not something that we do. We try to build relationships even when we might disagree. The consultation will consider how the phase-out should occur, how impacts can be managed, and support for those effected as well as new opportunities. Submissions for that consultation process are open until May 31. After that, an independent panel will compile a report and provide it to the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry by 30 September 2023. The independent panel will then undertake face-to-face consultation across Australia, deliver virtual forums, and seek and consider written submissions.

The WA government will fight for the best possible outcome for our sheep industry in Western Australia, and I encourage all Western Australian sheep producers and agricultural industry bodies to have their say during the consultation process. As we know, the federal government has made it clear that this policy is a matter of when, not if. It is therefore vital for the local sheep industry to have its say in the current consultation process. Strong Western Australian input in the consultation phase will ensure our concerns and views are factored into the shaping of the final policy. In respect to the final policy, we are keen to see that the sheep industry is given certainty about the way forward as soon as possible.

The federal Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry said that the independent panel report will be publicly released in late 2023 or early 2024. From 2024, the implementation plan for the phase-out of live sheep exports by sea will be developed. I will repeat what I have consistently said. The Western Australian government believes that the current measures, including the northern summer live export ban and the additional vet checks and monitoring, have worked well and are effective and appropriate. That is our position. However, it is the federal government, not state government, that holds the levers for live exports, and this government will continue to fight for the best possible outcome for our sheep industry here in Western Australia.