

LIVE EXPORT TRADE

Statement

HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West) [10.03 pm]: I wish to bring to the attention of members a public meeting that was held in Fremantle on 12 October about the live shipping debate. Senator Chris Back was present; he is a former veterinary surgeon of many years' standing, with extensive experience in the export of livestock from Western Australia. As we all know, he is now a Liberal Senator for Western Australia.

The points of view at the meeting were very unbalanced and a very uneven account of the livestock industry was given. In saying that, I would like to clear up a few mistruths that emerged that evening. The first one relates to sheep deaths on live transports. Today, not a lot of sheep die during live export. The official figures are that 99.2 per cent of sheep that are loaded reach their destination; the figure for cattle is 99.9 per cent. That is basically a 0.8 mortality rate for sheep at sea, which is generally a three to four-week voyage. Animals die naturally; they will die in the paddocks, they will die on a ship or they will die in the farmyard. From an exporter's point of view, there is no money in dead animals or animals that have been mistreated or do not meet the required standards.

The next point that was raised was that animals receive no medical attention during live exports. There is nothing further from the truth. I challenge any of these people who get up to make such claims: have they been on a live export ship? Have they travelled to the destination? Have they been to the farms and the holding paddocks? The point is that these ships have vets on board. The animals are fed a specific diet, which ensures that they maintain body weight. The mature sheep at least maintain body weight, and the younger animals actually continue to gain weight, so there are actually more kilos delivered during the voyage than on shore for a general shipment.

The stockmen are trained; there is always a strong contingent of Australian stockmen on these ships. The stock that is selected from farms are of top quality; they are selected by the live export buyers. Everyone in the trade, be it the farmer, exporter, truckie or whatever, will ask: can we do this better? The answer is yes. To the exporters' credit, they are continually endeavouring to invest further, both here and in the Middle East. Whether we look at the yards down in Baldivis, the trucking practices in Western Australia, or at the investment in the Middle East, no-one who is serious about being open-minded could say that the exporters are not doing their utmost.

In some cases, it would not matter what we say; some people just want to get rid of this trade. The buyers have been buying from Western Australia for some 30 years. If the stock were so badly mistreated, or were not up to standard, do members think the buyers would be coming back? If we go to a restaurant and have a bad meal, we may go back once but we will not go back twice, so it is absolute nonsense to say that the stock arrive in poor condition.

If we cut this trade, other countries will take over the market with nowhere near the commitment Australians have put into it over the years. Exporters have spent many millions of dollars in infrastructure—freezers, chillers and stock handlers—in the Middle East. The culture of the Middle East is different from ours and we must respect that. The client purchases the product of choice. Some of the anti-live export trade people need to remember that, like Australians, people in the Middle East have a choice about the selection and presentation of their food products, and a choice about supply.

Some say that there is no price difference between the domestic market and the live export market; I will provide some facts on that. A 38-kilo lamb delivered to the holding paddocks after having been selected by the exporters is \$90; a 38-kilo lamb in the domestic trade is, at best, \$60 plus skin. The investors are investing in the future, and I congratulate Emanuel Exports and Wellard Group. Both companies are offering incentives for the coming years, with fixed prices for 2011 and 2012. There are different incentives from both companies, but they are increasing prices for the next two years, and I challenge the domestic market: where are its investors? Members must ask themselves why farmers are sending their sheep over the border at the moment. We all know that seasonal conditions are not good; the live exporters have stayed true to their contracts, but the domestic market has pushed down its price, and some half a million sheep have gone over the border. This purely comes back to price difference; there is some \$15 to \$20 difference, ex-farm, for the purchase of these sheep.

What are the local processors and the unions going to do long term? Are they reinvesting in the future? These are questions that all sections of the industry need to ask. Sheep numbers are now approximately 15 million. That comes off a high of 34 million head some years ago. I would have thought that now is the time to keep the industry viable. Rebuilding of the state's sheep flock is essential, particularly the ewe numbers. Any shire around this state that has one million or more sheep in its shire has a strong local workforce and economy, whether it is shearers, fencing contractors, trucks taking sheep in and out or fertiliser requirements. A long list of people are employed, which then flows on to the local economy.

To claim that abolishing the live export trade would make no difference is absolute nonsense. I would encourage any people who are so misinformed to get first-hand knowledge. Unfortunately, bodies such as the RSPCA will not accept anything but the abolishment of the trade, regardless of the improvement of the welfare, conditions and mortality of the animals in both country of origin and destination. This trade is an important part of both regional Western Australia and the Australian economy.