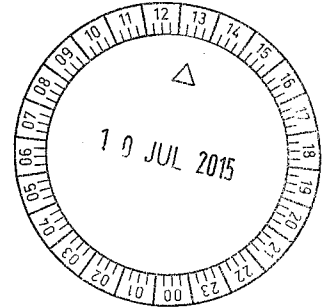




WAFARMERS



Submission

Selection Committee into the Operations of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Western Australia (Inc)

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Agriculture in Western Australia

The Western Australian Farmers Federation Inc. (WAFarmers) is the State's largest and most influential rural advocacy and service organisation. Founded in 1912, WAFarmers boasts a membership of over 4,200 farmers including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually to Western Australia's economy. Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental wellbeing of that land and the animals that graze it.

Introduction

WAFarmers believes everyone has a moral obligation to treat all animals humanely. It is not acceptable to allow animals to suffer as a result of deliberate ill treatment, neglect or poor management practices of farmed animals.

WA livestock producers take their responsibilities for welfare issues seriously and they are committed to the delivery of good animal welfare outcomes through a nationally agreed framework setting out the standards and guidelines for animal welfare.

Farmers recognise that high standards of animal husbandry and production efficiency go hand in hand with good animal health, welfare, wellbeing and social acceptability. The vast majority of animal cruelty cases reported by the RSPCA under its powers of prosecution occur in urban areas and involves the abuse of companion animals such as dogs and cats.

Animal welfare legislation in all states and territories provide certain powers for inspectors to act pre-emptively if they have reason to believe an offence will occur and to take action once the owner has committed a breach of the legislation.

However, there are serious concerns within the farming community that the RSPCA has moved beyond its charter and responsibilities. This is due to two important issues;

- a. The definition of 'animal welfare' as opposed to 'animal cruelty'. The RSPCA's vision is to prevent 'cruelty', a malicious intent to harm an animal, by actively promoting their care and protection by ensuring the enforcement of existing laws at Federal and State level. The farming industries vision focusses on the enhancement of 'animal welfare', through the adoption and implementation of agreed national animal welfare codes of best husbandry practices, standards and guidelines.

These interpretation differences are absolutely critical to the operational process going forward.

- b. The RSPCA's recent and alarming change of direction and involvement in animal activist campaigns. We can only assume this is being driven by RSPCA directors, with little or no experience of the farming industry, to meet new financial aspirations for the organisation, at the risk of alienating themselves from the farming community.

A clear example of this propaganda is evident on the RSPCA WA website. When the home page opens a strap line appears - Live Exports the real story – when you click on this, it takes readers to the RSPCA Australia website which states - 'Write to your MP to ban this horror'.

The generalisation of the whole industry rather than addressing incidents of animal cruelty is in stark contrast to the approach taken by the RSPCA WA to individual incidents of animal cruelty to companion animals.

The meat and live export market is critically important to the Western Australian economy and industry. A report by ABARES states the reasons why countries continue to demand live imports instead of boxed meat. The report found that while it is often to do with cultural and religious reasons, it is also because of lack of refrigeration, unsuitability of land and climate for local production, support for a local meat processing industry, and lower tariffs or higher subsidies on live imports compared with imported meat.

The study makes it clear that if we pull back on live exports it will not translate to increased meat imports from Australia.

We now have a comprehensive analysis of the drivers for this trade. WAFarmers would encourage everyone, including animal rights organisations and RSPCA directors that have questioned the future of this trade, to read the report. Federal Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce said the report dispels some of the myths and misinformation that are propagated about the trade.

Australia is the fifth-largest exporter of live cattle, the second-largest exporter of live sheep, and the 13th-largest exporter of live goats in the world and the live export industry is valued at over \$1 billion to the economy. Those most reliant on the live cattle export trade were located in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions of Western Australia and for farms selling sheep, live exports accounted for a larger share of sheep and lamb receipts in Western Australia (48pc) than in the other states (around 30pc).

It should also be acknowledged that Australia has put in place world class standards of animal welfare practices to ensure animals leaving our shores are treated humanely from start to finish.

There is considerable concern that the RSPCA (national and state based) directors is focussing its efforts on building financial security through political campaigning on provocative and emotive subjects including the banning of the live animal export industry.

The RSPCA WA is now widely regarded within the farming community as anti-farming and reflecting the views promoted by a number of animal activist groups with an agenda of establishing animal welfare standards that go beyond regulatory requirements for farmed animals.

The RSPCA WA must regain its focus as an independent arbiter of animal welfare in Western Australia as agreed under its obligations set out by the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with DAFWA.

WAFarmers comments to the examination of:

A. Its funding from the government

Under current arrangements, RSPCA WA receives \$500,000 per annum to meet its obligations within the Animal Welfare Act under the MOU with DAFWA. Approximately ten RSPCA inspectors are employed, mainly in the metropolitan areas, specifically to fulfil their responsibilities in terms of companion animal welfare compliance and enforcement and public education per say.

The government funding provision is complimented by public donations to support RSPCA oversight of the welfare of companion animals.

Providing RSPCA WA inspectors remain within the agreed remit as set out under the conditions of the MOU, WAFarmers will support the continuation of the government's funding contribution.

Having said this, we request RSPCA WA and its directors must be publically accountable and transparent in terms of their funding and accounts. Clear evidence is required to dispel the view that RSPCA WA is providing funds to support activist based campaigns being promoted by RSPCA Australia.

B. Its Objective

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2002, responsibilities are divided into 2 key parts:

1. General inspectors enforce the provisions concerning offences against animals (including cruelty against animals) contained in Part 3 of the Act; and
2. Scientific inspectors enforce the provisions concerning the use of animals for scientific purposes under a licence contained in Part 2 of the Act.

The RSPCA obligations under Part 3 of the Act lie with the investigation of animal cruelty complaints for non-commercial livestock and companion animals as well as educating the public on the responsibility of owning a pet.

The Livestock Compliance Unit (LCU) within DAFWA are responsible for the monitoring of animal welfare compliance at livestock aggregation points across all levels of the livestock supply chain as well as providing extension and education in relation to animal livestock welfare.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between DAFWA (LCU Inspectors) and RSPCA WA has established a process that in principle, works well at livestock sale yards, except on occasions when RSPCA inspectors attempt to control matters by, for example, isolating individual animals that creates more stress and injury to the animal. This is a clear indication of the inspector's ignorance of proper protocols.

However at the farm level there is a significant level of distrust arising from the attitude and behaviour of RSPCA WA inspectors and confusion about the roles and responsibilities of staff; a situation which is not helped by the intrusion of inspectors taking a militant approach to an animal(s) wellbeing or survival. For example, a inspector choosing to destroy an animal without proper engagement with the farmer, in a situation where it may have been more appropriate to nurse the animal back to health under the supervision of a vet.

The key issue identified by the above example, are the differences in the strongly held beliefs of appropriate animal welfare for a) farmed animals as compared to b) a companion animal like a dog or cat. This is due in part to the different philosophies of farm animal welfare requirements, held by each entity.

We understand a high percentage of RSPCA WA inspectors have gained their experience in the United Kingdom and although these inspectors have to undergo up-skilling in Australia, misconceptions about appropriate farmed animal husbandry practices applicable to Australian livestock production systems, may be misconstrued. It should be noted that Australia has in place animal welfare measures with welfare standards beyond those implemented in other countries. We believe there is widespread misunderstanding of who is responsible for what or where these responsibilities lie.

WAFarmers recommends clear communication is required in terms of these obligations. We would strongly propose that a communication plan is developed to enhance the engagement needed between both parties (RSPCA inspectors and Farmers) so that conceived philosophies, misunderstandings and barriers about roles and responsibilities can be broken down and resolved. WAFarmers is willing to assist with this process.

We are not convinced by the claim that RSPCA WA is not involved with RSPCA Australia in its advocacy of activist type campaigns; including the banning live of exports as evidenced by the link to this campaign on their website; while ignoring its core animal welfare responsibilities. WAFarmers recommends that instead of RSPCA demonising our valuable

agricultural industries, it would be better placed working with industry and spending its advertising dollars to promote our world leading animal welfare practices to other nations.

The RSPCA WA, as a government funded organisation, needs to remain objective and not take on extreme animal activist views that are inconsistent with the legal and humane production of food in WA. RSPCA WA continues to advocate policies that differ from those of the Western Australian Government.

There is a need for greater accountability by RSPCA directors to ensure there is no conflict of interest in using personal views to drive activist based agendas beyond the stated mission to improve the welfare of animals.

An example of this became apparent during the development of the national animal welfare standards and guidelines for sheep and cattle. In October 2008 all interested parties including representatives from RSPCA, gathered at the table with industry to begin the development of the sheep and cattle welfare standards and guidelines. After five years of robust discussion and agreement on the approved standards and guidelines (S&Gs), the Agricultural Minister at the time issued a public consultation in mid-2013, seeking final comments on the agreed standards and guidelines for sheep and cattle. The intention was to incorporate the S&Gs in to legislation in each jurisdiction to harmonise the welfare standards across Australia. However, even though the RSPCA had agreed to the S&Gs as noted in the consultation, they chose to derail the process by issuing a media statement claiming the standards did not go far enough and they would not support them as presented in the consultation. This statement resulted in some industry bodies changing their positions, stalling the process.

Consequently, WAFarmers would be strongly opposed to the allocation of more responsibilities from the Department of Agriculture and Food to RSPCA WA as a result of cost cutting measures currently impacting DAFWA services and resources.

WAFarmers will only be supportive of the RSPCA WA objectives if they remain committed to their core charter and provide evidence of this to regain the confidence and support they have lost in the rural and farming communities.

C. The use of its powers

The RSPCA is an organisation that used to be well respected by the general community and it is recognised that the organisation has an important role to play in the regulation of animal welfare. But we emphasise that a key component of the RSPCA WA mission must include open, transparent and accountable collaboration with industry stakeholders and actions in accordance with agreed farmed animal welfare codes of practice.

There is a growing perception that the RSPCA has repositioned itself as an activist group and that this is not in the best interests of animal welfare or the RSPCA itself and there is the potential for more and more farmers and farm leaders to lose confidence and trust in the RSPCA and the important role it plays in the regulation of animal welfare.

The RSPCA must regain its focus as an independent arbiter of animal welfare in Western Australia and secondly, we suggest, it must examine its role as a provider of approved (branded) farming schemes. As noted above, there is existing animal health and welfare standards and guidelines and animal cruelty laws in place and WAFarmers questions the need for RSPCA approved farming schemes in addition to existing legislation. These schemes appear to be a revenue raising exercise for the RSPCA, which can diminish the organisation's credibility.

WAFarmers believes the key role for RSPCA WA is to deliver their obligations under the legislative requirements around animal welfare as noted within the current Animal Welfare

Act, specifically the compliance and enforcement of companion animals and the education of the general public who own companion animals and/or livestock.

WAFarmers strongly believes it is important for the RSPCA to establish well-balanced skills-based Board of Directors. An industry panel could assist with the selection of suitable candidates before they stand for election.

WAFarmers recommends the RSPCA establish a governance structure that prevents directors from turning the organisation into an activist group and away from its origin vision.

WAFarmers recommends RSPCA WA must be more transparency and accountability with its budgets and financial management and suggest a public release of its annual accounts.

Summary

The RSPCA has a significant role to play in the regulation of animal welfare but it must be careful to maintain its position of trust and respect in the community. The way to do this is through careful consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders, including farmers and farmer representative bodies such as WA Farmers. There has been a considerable loss of confidence in the RSPCA by farmers, which has resulted in them pulling their membership and support.

The RSPCA cannot let itself become captive to the interests of any one narrow section of society. Already there is a growing view that the RSPCA has repositioned itself as an activist group and this is not in the best interests of animal welfare or the RSPCA itself. The public, farmers and farm leaders are losing confidence and trust in the RSPCA and the important role it should play in the regulation of animal welfare.

The RSPCA must regain its focus as an independent arbiter of animal welfare in Western Australia and return to its core charter if it is to retain the confidence and support of the farming community.