



Animal Welfare in Australia

Draft Policy Paper

Introduction / Background

The AIA recognises the important role of animal industries in Australia’s agricultural production. The welfare of those animals is equally a critical responsibility for farmers and graziers, stock handlers, abattoirs and live exporters and is a pre-condition for a social licence to produce animal-sourced food and fibre.

Australia’s animal agriculture sector contributes significantly to our participation in global trade. Animal sourced food and fibre is sought after locally and globally due to Australia’s reputation for superior quality food safety and provenance – particularly in terms of ethical production. Australia has led the world in legislation and voluntary regulation as regards acceptable standards of welfare for the care, handling and transportation of animals. Breaches of those standards, even overseas, as regards Australian sourced animals, have been dealt with swiftly and comprehensively. In many cases, this has been at significant cost to compliant and responsible producers and exporters. However new, largely urban based, perceptions of animal sentience and “rights” have imposed additional expectations and demands from animal activist groups on animal husbandry which can’t be summarily dismissed and must be carefully analysed, considered and addressed.

Animal welfare in agriculture encompasses the essential needs of any animal, such as freedom from hunger, thirst, pain, disease, excessive heat and stress. Additional needs are the space and resources to facilitate natural and social behaviours. Community expectations are that those whose business involves animal husbandry are responsible to ensure all of these needs are met. These conditions also are likely to result in greater productivity both in fecundity and protein and fibre production and, in conjunction with sophisticated traceability, additional access to overseas markets.

The AIA has a commitment to ethics across the agricultural supply chain and in all sectors, including all aspects of animal agriculture, and its accreditation requirements means that members must adhere to high ethical standards¹.

Issue Statement

In most countries, the operation of animal industries is subject to the granting of a social licence by

¹ To see the AIA Code of Ethics and accreditation products, go to www.aginstitute.com.au.

an increasingly urban based, society. Failure of the animal industries to meet the reasonable expectations of society (even if perceived by producers as impractical or unworkable) and for that compliance to be transparent and audited, is likely to lead to severe restriction or the demise of that industry. Thus, it is in the interest of animal producers to meet these expectations effectively. However this does not imply credence or acceptance of unrealistic and idealistic demands from animal activist groups who see animal rights (as distinct from “welfare”) as a tool to realise an ultimate aim to eliminate animal-based production from agricultural food and fibre production, rather than focussing on the welfare of animals within legitimate food and fibre production industries.

There are many challenges for animal-based industries that put pressure on the maintaining of animal welfare standards:

- Increasing costs of production including long-established animal husbandry practices (for example mulesing in merino wool production) becoming unacceptable to modern urban society and overseas markets.
- Increased compliance costs in maintaining legislated requirements for animal care.
- International competition for markets including international imports of animal products with many of our competitors having lower standards of animal welfare than Australia and New Zealand.
- Biosecurity threats and challenges (e.g. African Swine Fever).
- Political and activist pressure including activist trespass, theft and vandalism of property.
- Trends towards vegetarianism and plant-based meat substitutes.
- Climate change and variability, and frequency of extreme weather conditions including drought and water shortages.

Without our high standards of animal welfare, the perceived reputation of Australia’s animal products would likely decrease, impacting our global reputation and export market access as well as our local social licence to operate.

Australia is a global leader in animal welfare standards. In order to maintain our markets until our global competitors are forced to adopt these standards by market pressures, there will be significant cost. These costs may need to be subsidised by governments in the short to medium term, with an eye to the future rather than shut down the export business and allow it to be dominated by countries with low compliance and therefore reduced costs of production and transport.

Intensive Animal Production

Intensive Animal production is a long-standing practice and requirement for many of our animal industries. A number of Asian markets demand feedlot produced grain fed beef for at least the last 100 days of production. Chicken and pig production is also centred on intensive feeding and husbandry.

The AIA recognises the need for maintaining these industries in order to be competitive in cost and to maintain supply. However, the animal welfare issues associated with intensive production are different and subject to a more stringent social licence which is increasingly coming under public scrutiny. It is therefore critical that the intensive animal industries maintain a proactive stance in addressing actual and perceived issues that are specific to intensive animal care. These include:

- Adequate climatic control, particularly in terms of shade and cooling in sheds or yards.
- Adequate, readily available, food and water.

- Adequate yard, pen or barn space to exhibit natural behaviours and social interactions.
- Minimisation of stress during movement or treatment of animals².
- Adequate disease control within groups of animals in close proximity to each other.
- Appropriate and equal consideration of animal comfort and welfare alongside efficiency and economics in design of intensive production facilities.

Objectives

The AIA's animal welfare policy position requires that:

1. Appropriate animal welfare is our non-negotiable responsibility when keeping livestock for agricultural production.
2. Where producer decisions are made to increase or decrease herd/flock sizes as required by the economic climate, this is carried out humanely and in accordance with our community licence to operate as regulated by local and federal laws.
3. Innovative ideas and new technologies that ultimately improve how the basic needs of livestock are met, are researched and applied.
4. Balanced breeding programs that do not focus on one trait to the ultimate detriment to another, thereby maintaining and improving the overall genetic quality of the Australian livestock population and not decreasing the genetic pool.
5. Improvements in livestock management strategies and genetics to improve local and global herds to cope with the stresses of a changing climate.
6. Continued careful analysis of housing and husbandry practices to ensure that conditions provided for farm animals are not imposing unreasonable stress and are meeting the reasonable day to day needs of animals within our care, including during transportation, treatment and handling and prior to slaughter.

Analysis of Options and Policy Recommendations

General

As a minimum, all livestock must be provided:

- a. Adequate food and water (*Obj 1,2,5,6*)
- b. Appropriate health care (e.g. vaccinations, nutrition) (*Obj 1,3,6*)
- c. Appropriate treatment for illnesses under veterinary advice (*Obj 1,3,6*)
- d. Appropriate selection of genetics for particular climatic and geographical conditions (*Obj 1,4 & 5*)
- e. Careful protection of the diverse genetic purebred pool available to producers (*Obj 1 & 4*)
- f. Analysis of treatment methodology to ensure they minimise stress despite the long term outcome (e.g. mulesing of sheep) (*Obj 1,3 & 6*)
- g. Room to move around freely within a reasonable area (including barns and feedlots) (*Obj 1 & 6*)
- h. Appropriate methods of restraint and handling when carrying out required treatments, shearing etc. (*Obj 1, 3 & 6*)
- i. Use of safe and appropriate transport mechanisms (*Obj 1 & 6*)
- j. Adequate management of health and comfort during times of extreme weather/temperature (*Obj 1,5,6*)

² for example using techniques developed by Dr Temple Grandin for movement of animals in races and yards

- k. Minimisation of stress prior to transportation, essential treatment or slaughter in abattoirs (*Obj 1 & 6*)

If a producer is unable to provide these on a continuing basis, the producer must make the decision of whether it is economically and morally appropriate to continue to utilise livestock in their farming system. Producers should ensure that they are farming to the appropriate economic climate. This includes:

- Increasing and decreasing stocking rates to ensure (as much as practically possible) that feed supply matches demand.
- Ensuring breed selection is appropriate to the climatic conditions of the area. Specific traits can be selected to match the requirements on specific farms or specific regions. (For example greater parasite resistance and improved tolerance to temperature extremes).
- Improvements to farming systems, management styles, and on-farm technology such as sensors can greatly assist in appropriate, welfare friendly, livestock husbandry. Significant improvements to remote technologies (e.g. the “Internet of Things”), robotics and automated systems means producers can manage needs such as feed and water supply with limited requirement for significant farm labour.
- Improvements to energy efficient cooling systems and availability of on-farm energy solutions such as solar PV, can significantly influence a producer’s ability to manage temperatures inside closed buildings housing a large number of livestock.
- Changes to land use and natural resource management can ultimately improve the profitability of a farm through improved livestock wellbeing and reduced stress eg greater shelter provided during extreme weather events.
- Improvements to specific traits in livestock through breeding and genetics can greatly influence livestock welfare. Diverse breeding can improve the health of livestock and maintains diversity of the genetic pool and provides production opportunities for hybrid vigour.

Transportation

Australia has large areas of uninhabited land, and large areas of grazed land in the north. Hence, there is a requirement to transport livestock vast distances quickly and safely to reduce any detrimental effects travel might have on their needs. Australia is a world leader in welfare standards for livestock travelling both domestically, and internationally. These standards have come about through regular identification of areas for improvement and innovative ways of managing animal welfare whilst travelling. That is not to say additional improvements cannot be made. As extreme weather events become more common, we must ensure our livestock transport systems can continue to meet the demands of high-quality animal welfare standards. The focus on a high-level of animal welfare will ensure a continued global presence for Australia’s livestock producers in the competitive global live-animal market. Technological improvements such as close-range sensing and monitoring (for example temperature and humidity), and improved climate control options will improve our ability to manage livestock needs whilst travelling long distances.

Policy Recommendation

Australia has largely led the world in imposing standards on ships, road transport and accreditation of overseas abattoirs for its livestock. Whilst necessary and consistent with the Australian social licence to produce animals for export, it is an additional cost, currently not borne by most major overseas competitors.

The costs are probably not sustainable if borne entirely by producers and/or exporters. We therefore have two choices:

1. Take the New Zealand option and cease all live exports thus leaving the supply of live animals to markets who will not purchase the meat from source, to countries with less or no, stringent animal welfare standards.
2. Continue to provide animals sourced sustainably and ethically, and simultaneously work by example and negotiation, through the WTO or other organisations, to have similar standards adopted by all countries and thus “re-level” the live-export playing field.

The AIA endorses the second option. It is noted that this will likely require some short to medium term taxpayer support due to the significant increases in transport and compliance costs associated with increasing space per animal on ships, monitoring of animals until welfare standards are adopted universally by treaty or voluntary regulation based on market demand.

Recommended Readings

- Model Code of Practise for Welfare of Animals
(<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/animal/welfare/standards-guidelines>)

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