

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into the RSPCA Victoria

Melbourne — 31 May 2017

Members

Mr Bernie Finn — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Participating members

Mr Greg Barber

Ms Samantha Dunn

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Witnesses

Mr Leonard Vallance, Livestock Group President, and

Mr Brian Ahmed, Egg Group Vice-President, Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR — Gentlemen, welcome. This is an inquiry into the RSPCA Victoria, as I am sure you are aware, and this is of course a meeting or a hearing of the economy and infrastructure committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by privilege. Could I ask you to, for the sake of the record, state your name, position, organisation and also suburb or town, and then start off with perhaps a 5 or 10 minutes address. Then we will open to questions.

Mr AHMED — My name is Brian Ahmed. I am vice-president of the Victorian Farmers Federation egg producer group and also run my own farm in west Victoria in Werribee. I am an egg farmer. While I have had the utmost respect for the RSPCA in the past, as a farmer I have become confused about who the RSPCA are and what they stand for. The question is: are they a regulator or are they a campaigner? I am a second-generation egg farmer, and while I may not be as well educated as some people, I have had almost 50 years experience in looking after poultry. My family began farming in Australia in 1969 as free-range farmers, and over the years we moved to barn. In 2002 we moved to 100 per cent cage-egg production.

Animal welfare is of course the number one priority of any farmer, and their life and the life of their families depends on it. My family, like many other families in Australia, have invested millions of dollars back into this industry to set up a fully controlled environment cage system to comply with animal welfare, food safety, biosecurity and the environmental requirements set out in the code. Today, even though I comply with the law, I know the RSPCA want these systems banned and they are actively lobbying government and running media campaigns to this effect. The RSPCA needs to decide whether it wants to be a campaign organisation or a regulator who has the powers to police the law. My concern and the concern of many of our farmers is that even though we comply with all our legal requirements we have an organisation, the RSPCA, who can walk onto our farms and pass judgement on our farming systems that they do not support and have very little knowledge of.

Our industry also spends millions of dollars in research and development every year through industry levies, making sure that farmers continually improve their farming systems when it comes to animal welfare and food safety while keeping the food affordable for all Australian families. Farmers know that welfare of animals is important because the healthier and happier their birds are, the more productive they are. The future and the future of their families depend on it. How can RSPCA accept money from government when they campaign against government policy? How can they be impartial in assessing breaches in the POCTA act when they are campaigning for changes in that act?

So to us the RSPCA should stick to looking after domestic animals and leave the farm animals to the experts. It needs to decide what it wants to be. If it wants to campaign, it should not be a regulator, and if it wants to regulate, it should not campaign.

Mr VALLANCE — My name is Leonard Vallance. I am a livestock and cropping farmer from north-west Victoria, where I run beef cattle with a very small feedlotting operation and agist merino sheep over the summer period. We also have a very small flock of Boer goats. I am currently the chairman of the VFF livestock group. I also take part in the livestock industry council, which is an industry-wide committee which meets at Attwood quarterly to discuss animal welfare issues. Prior to this job I was the chair of PrimeSafe Victoria. I have also been on the Cattle Council of Australia for some 12 or 15 years. I also chaired the Southern Australian Beef Research Council, which set priorities for Meat and Livestock Australia's research into animal welfare and standards and codes of practice in the beef industry. I have done that. I am also the public officer for the Mallee Landcare group, which is the largest, by area, Landcare group in the state and the most profitable by far.

The CHAIR — Sounds like you fit into the category, 'If you want something done properly, ask a busy man'.

Mr VALLANCE — We do things. Our issue in this is that our industry — I will call it our industry; the sheep, cattle and goat industries — through its industry bodies and levies, has developed codes of practice for the best practice of maintaining and growth of livestock in Australia in Australian conditions. That has been done in collaboration with the RSPCA at a national and state level, and they have signed off on those codes of practice. So they are party to those codes, and therefore we feel that we actually lead the world in animal welfare practices. Given the extremes of our climate and what available resources we have in Australia, we do an exceptional job of providing a good environment for our livestock.

We also provide, through MLA, training opportunities for farmers to increase their animal welfare knowledge in that area of production to get the best outcomes for their farms. A case in point was the production of the beef program from MLA, called More Beef from Pastures, and a large part of that document was around animal welfare and best practice.

That is where we come from, and we feel we are more than qualified because we actually put money back into our industry at the sum of \$5 a head per cow traded in Australia into these programs, which is a substantial amount of money. In the sheep industry, if you work it out on cattle figures, it is almost \$8 a cow in the sheep industry. So a total of around about \$50 million a year gets spent in marketing and animal welfare benefits to the beef and sheep and goat industries.

We have an issue with the RSPCA as a lobby group who are actively lobbying against live exports. Victoria currently exports, by air and by boat, goats, sheep and cattle, and they are actively lobbying against those in a legitimate industry which is legal in this country. That is very detrimental to the environment, particularly the goat industry. The goat export industry is providing a remedial break for the environment in north-west Victoria and western New South Wales.

Apart from that, the live export trade is very important to trade to Australia. Particularly when you look at the dairy heifer trade into China these days, the benefits to the state of Victoria are enormous. So we have a serious issue about where they sit there now as a regulator and as a lobby group. They cannot be both. We are quite definite that they are either one or the other. We have great confidence in Agriculture Victoria and their ability to regulate the broadacre livestock industries as we work with them very closely and have regular contact with them probably on a weekly basis with animal welfare issues that may arise in the industry in improving industry values for the wider community.

There is a thing called livestock production assurance, which is a national quality assurance program, and an animal welfare segment of that program is about to roll out nationally, and we are party to that agreement. That covers almost every livestock production farm in Australia.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you very much for that. I will begin by asking what the VFF relationship is with the RSPCA. Is it cordial? Do you speak? Is there any relationship at all in fact?

Mr VALLANCE — In the broadacre livestock industries we have always had a good working relationship, I would call it, with the RSPCA through the development of codes of practice, and that is where we have contact with them most. With animal welfare, as I said, we greatly deal with the department of agriculture. We tend not to have weekly contact with them, though.

Mr AHMED — From the egg group we have very little relationship with them at all, because whenever we want to sit down and speak to them they do not support a farming system that produces approximately 60 per cent of the eggs that we produce here in Australia. So they do not want to discuss anything with us unless we want to phase out that system, and that is not on the table.

The CHAIR — Mr Ahmed, we have seen over a period of years now actions by what I would describe as perhaps animal welfare extremists, particularly in the egg industry. Do you suspect that the RSPCA is involved in that at all?

Mr AHMED — No, I do not think the RSPCA is directly involved, but I think they use that information to their benefit. From what I have seen I do not see any connection in it. I had personal experience with the RSPCA inspectors a number of years ago. They come onto farms and say that they have had a report about animal cruelty. Our place is a biosecure farm, and no-one is allowed on, so I do not know how they would have got that report. But they use their authority to come onto farms to inspect and then walk away with no further contact from them.

The CHAIR — Do you have any right of appeal or the ability to actually defend yourself from that sort of activity?

Mr AHMED — I am not sure if we have the right, but I think a farmer is about going back and looking after their animals. We do not get involved in something unless we are actually taken to court over something. We basically want it to go away and for them to just leave us alone to do what we do best.

The CHAIR — Mr Vallance, I remember being in Darwin a few years ago, when the live export trade was closed down overnight, and the impact that it had up in the Territory. What sort of impact would the closure of the live export trade have on Victorian farmers?

Mr VALLANCE — The closure of that trade affected my business in Victoria.

The CHAIR — Really?

Mr VALLANCE — Oh, yes, it certainly did. We saw a drop in cattle prices, there is no doubt about that. We had a combination of climatic conditions in the north where the cattle could not be held in the north, and so they were transported south. Transporting those animals in itself is an animal welfare issue, over that distance. You are bringing tropical cattle down to a colder climate, which is not good for the cattle. Then the cattle that are bred in the north of Australia are a very lean manufacturing-type animal which has a very specific market in the world. That has grown around the Indonesian demand for lean meat in the way they eat their meat. The other portion of the animals that are processed in Queensland are fattened a little bit and exported to America, but that is a limited market of 300 000 tonnes a year. So if the Indonesian, Chinese, Philippines market is closed, there is nowhere else for that meat to go. Like it or not, Indonesia is a Third World country, and it does not have refrigeration available to every household, so the meat has to be slaughtered and eaten on the same day. So that meat would then flow into the southern states and cause huge disruption, as it did then.

Mr LEANE — With our first witness we had a bit of discussion about welfare being subjective. I suppose, Mr Vallance, particularly in where you work, cruelty can be subjective. There will be some people who say it is cruel to raise animals if their end will be that we will eat them. There will be elements that say that. So I suppose it is a juggling act that you have that there will always be that presence. I do not know if that is something you want to comment on, but I think that is the reality.

Mr VALLANCE — I do. I believe we live in the greatest country in the world, and with that comes the freedom to eat and do pretty much whatever you like, within reason. It is your personal choice as to what you eat and what you feed your children or whoever eats at your house. If it is your choice not to eat meat, so be it. You wish to only eat meat and no other form of food whatsoever, so be it. We respect the view of the freedom in this country of people to do as they wish, within reason.

Mr LEANE — Also within the legislative framework.

Mr VALLANCE — Yes.

Mr LEANE — Mr Ahmed, you mentioned that in your case, and in the case of many people in your federation, you endeavour to comply with every law and every regulation. I suppose, though, you would want to see a level playing field. They might not be members of yours, but if there are farms similar to yours that are not doing the right thing by their animals, as you have said you endeavour to do, you would want to see some regulatory authority coming in and either stopping it or making it — —

Mr AHMED — Yes, that is correct. The industry has done a lot of work with quality assurance programs, and we are educating farmers to improve their farming practices and meet all the requirements required of them. If we see a farmer that is not doing something right, then we assist; we try and help them to improve their farming practice and make sure that they comply. Because no matter what, we are only as good as our weakest link, so we want farmers to make sure they are doing the right thing. A lot of these QA programs are voluntary at the moment; they are not compulsory. We have been doing it for a number of years under the egg group. It does not matter which farming system you use — cage, farm or free range — all three must meet the requirements that we suggest. Under the VFF they need to be compliant before we accept them as members.

Mr LEANE — Has your arm of the VFF had similar experience to Mr Vallance, where you have a good relationship with Agriculture Victoria?

Mr AHMED — Yes. We have a very good relationship with the department of primary industries as well, DEDJTR.

Mr LEANE — I want to get away from the level playing field role, but will they perform that role?

Mr AHMED — I would assume they would, yes. That is our understanding.

Ms HARTLAND — Just so I understand, you are saying that you have a good relationship with the department of agriculture, but do they have regulatory authority? Are they able to come onto a farm and inspect?

Mr VALLANCE — Yes, they are.

Ms HARTLAND — And so under what circumstances can they do that?

Mr VALLANCE — In the broadacre sense, if there is a report delivered to the department of agriculture by email, phone call — a complaint. The complaint is then investigated by the regional office, which is then referred to the regional vet, which is then checked off with the CVO and his team. It is more or less triaged as to whether it is simply a vexatious complaint or whether there needs to be further action — some advice given to the farmer that there is inadequate water in the paddock or in the area that stock are held or there is injured stock, sick stock, whatever, maybe dead stock. They receive several thousand complaints a year. I think there were four prosecutions last year, quite blatant cruelty of animals, and that issue arises from time to time.

Ms HARTLAND — So you are saying there are several thousand complaints to them a year but there have only been four prosecutions. So what have they done with all the other complaints?

Mr VALLANCE — The others were investigated, advice given. It is a perception of what is cruelty. Some people think that stock standing in a paddock in the sun is cruel. Some people think that sheep that are freshly shorn in a paddock is cruel; they should be under cover. That is not the accepted way the Australian industry works.

Ms HARTLAND — So with people who were not prosecuted but were borderline in terms of the way they were treating animals, would the department then follow up with them?

Mr VALLANCE — They do follow up with them, and the network of veterinarians around the state work quite closely with farmer groups and so forth. One of the things they do is visit saleyards and abattoirs and those sorts of places regularly, talk to local veterinarians about issues in the district. They have this network of local veterinarians travelling around the areas, and they talk to those and get feedback on those sorts of people.

Ms HARTLAND — Does the RSPCA has similar powers of regulation?

Mr VALLANCE — Not in our area.

Ms HARTLAND — So for them to come onto your farm, what would be required for that to happen?

Mr VALLANCE — I do not believe they have a right. They have no place. We believe we have a system which we work towards with our codes of practice and developed with the department of agriculture. We believe that we have a standalone process there where we guarantee production. What you have got to remember is where I have mentioned the livestock production assurance earlier on and when that program was developed. It is now the case in Australia that, if you are not part of that program, you basically cannot sell livestock. It is a voluntary system, but no abattoir, no saleyard, will receive those stock without a national vendor declaration to say who looked after those animals and how they have been treated in the last 60 days.

Ms HARTLAND — Just so I get this absolutely clear, you do not have a problem with the department of agriculture. So are the RSPCA legally allowed to come onto your property, or are you saying they should not be allowed?

Mr VALLANCE — I do not believe that they have a legal right to come onto your property without a formal complaint. So how would they get that complaint? We have invested heavily in the regulation being vested with the government department.

Ms HARTLAND — But under their legislation — —

Mr VALLANCE — One of the reasons why we are here today is that we believe that the RSPCA is split ideologically between activism and regulation. You cannot be half-pregnant; you have got to be one or the other.

Ms HARTLAND — I understand your point, but what I am trying to get at is you accept that they are entitled to but you do not believe they should be able to. Am I getting this right?

Mr VALLANCE — No, I think you are better off to have a very clean system, where one regulator regulates animal welfare in the state.

Ms HARTLAND — But I am asking about the current situation. Am I right in saying that under their regulation they could come onto your property?

Mr VALLANCE — They possibly could, yes.

Ms HARTLAND — Okay. We will get the secretariat to check the regulation.

Mr VALLANCE — The actual legalities of that I think you would find would vary.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Mr Vallance, I just want to take up on a matter that you were just referring to there, in terms of the role of Agriculture Victoria versus the role of the RSPCA in the production animal sense essentially on farms, and having a look at the submission from the VFF as well, where it talks about the RSPCA doing most of its work in the companion animal or non-commercial livestock area. I am just wondering whether it is probably a view of the VFF and perhaps yours that the RSPCA really has no role that it needs to play in that space and that perhaps the charter around the RSPCA should be pushed across to companion animals and non-production animals in terms of the regulation.

Mr VALLANCE — It is our belief that the animal that sits on the couch and watches television with you probably has a different outcome in life to the one that is bred specifically to produce protein for us to consume, and that is the basic philosophy. We are carnivores. Therefore in our society we quite clearly discriminate between animals that we eat and animals that we have as companions, although there is that grey area in Melbourne where you can eat dog; that is interesting. We believe that there should be a clear line between companion animals and production animals.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — I guess, too, just to build on that, Mr Ahmed said he has got 50 years experience in the poultry industry, and I would imagine that you would have a similar amount —

Mr VALLANCE — Forty-three.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — forty-three years of experience — in the production animal side of things. I guess working through Agriculture Victoria they would have people who are obviously very experienced in dealing with production animals on the farm. Does the RSPCA have any level of, I guess, experience or expertise in terms of dealing with on-farm production?

Mr VALLANCE — I do not believe they do.

Mr AHMED — No, not that I know of.

Mr VALLANCE — My local government vet just left her current position after 21 years of operating in the north-west of the state. Now her experience in broadacre animals and intensive animals would be quite substantial.

Mr AHMED — When it comes to animal farming these days, if you are not efficient, there is not a lot of margin in it. I do not know what everyone thinks, if there is a whole profit and you can afford to leave dying animals on the side of your farm.

The CHAIR — I suspect that has been the case for a very long time.

Mr AHMED — Yes. So if you are not looking after those animals, there is no way that you would still be in the industry, and the ones that are in the industry are the ones that have been doing the right thing for a number of years now. They are second or third-generation farmers. We are getting to a stage where we are scaring our young people away from farming because they do not see any future in it with everything that is going on. I am really worried that we are going to lose the next generation if we do not give them some security.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — I guess it would also be fair to say, and I am off the farm myself — I am happy to put that on the record, and the farm I grew up on had sheep and cattle, so I do understand a bit about it as well — that one of the things that I have noticed is that there is a very big gap in the knowledge and information city people have against production animals as to what they do in terms of the companion animals that they probably have more to do with. Is that one of the problems that we have here, that the RSPCA is so focused on what happens in metropolitan areas with companion animals that they are really out of their depth completely in terms of the way systems work with production animals, and living in the country, which is very different to living in the city?

Mr VALLANCE — I will give you a case in point. I had my sister's oldest son, who has a university degree, visit the farm last year. My daughter, who is a veterinarian, was shearing a sheep in the woolshed, and he stood there and passed judgement on how cruel it was that she was mulesing that sheep. This is an educated person; he has a degree from a city university in Melbourne. He believed that she was mulesing that sheep. That is the level of ignorance that is there. She is quite a proficient shearer. That is the level that we are dealing with. They do not actually understand what is going on, how it is performed and who performs those tasks.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — And probably, Mr Ahmed, there is more misinformation in relation to the poultry industry than probably any other.

Mr AHMED — There is. It is a space that we did not get involved in as an industry, and certain groups took it over. That disconnection from city people to country people has definitely shown out there, because they are comparing pet animals to farm animals. You cannot say a farm animal shows its happiness the same way. A farm animal shows its happiness with its production and its growth. The better they are looked after and the better they are fed — without all these hormones and chemicals, which they imply and which have not been used in our industry at all — the better they will grow and produce eggs. It is as simple as that.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — If you were not looking after your animals properly, what would happen?

Mr AHMED — We would be out of business.

Mr VALLANCE — You would go out of business very quickly.

Mr AHMED — The other thing is about people. They say that no-one is buying cage eggs, but we still produce about 65 per cent of cage eggs in Australia. We want people to have the choice. If you put them on the shelves, people will pick what they want. If they all buy barn eggs, what do you think we will be doing as farmers? We will be all producing barn. You allow people to choose. We as farmers need to be responsible. We have got to do the right thing. We have got laws that need to be upheld, and we have got to abide by them. But we do not want people coming in and telling us we should farm one way or another. They all have their pros and cons, our systems. We know we do not have a perfect farming system, but we are working towards hopefully one day finding that one. If we do, the industry will move that way.

The CHAIR — As Mr O'Sullivan has declared his interests, I should declare mine. I grew up on a dairy farm, and I may recover from it at some stage.

Ms HARTLAND — I grew up in the country.

Mr BOURMAN — I grew up on a farm too. I am going to use the cage eggs as a bit of an example here. You mentioned that the VFF has standards for a cage egg farm. Are they developed in conjunction with the government, or is it something just the VFF dreams up one day? How do you arrive at them?

Mr AHMED — We already have regulations in place, and the VFF puts those in our constitution. We do not accept members if they are not complying with the law.

Mr BOURMAN — So to cut a long story short, there are laws about it.

Mr AHMED — Already, yes, there are.

Mr BOURMAN — Should that be cruel, and this goes to live export and anything else, what would happen? Notwithstanding that you are abiding by the regulations, you would be charged.

Mr AHMED — You would be, yes.

Mr BOURMAN — So it would seem to me that what we have got is a regulator trying to shut down an industry that is not cruel by their own standards.

Mr AHMED — That is correct. That is our concern.

Mr BOURMAN — That is my concern too, I guess. I have put it on the record before: I think the RSPCA does wonderful stuff in welfare. It just needs to go back to where it was.

Mr AHMED — I have got a letter here, which I can present to everyone, that the RSPCA sent to all egg farmers wanting them to meet to phase out their farming system.

The CHAIR — When was that sent, can I ask?

Mr AHMED — On 5 April this year.

The CHAIR — That was signed by?

Mr AHMED — Heather Neil, the CEO. She sent us a letter and wants to meet to phase out our farming systems. Over the phone when I contacted her, she also said, ‘If farmers don’t agree, we’ll boycott your brands’.

Mr BOURMAN — That leads me to my next question: RSPCA-approved meat. What have you got to say about that?

Mr AHMED — I am not in the chicken meat industry — —

Mr BOURMAN — That goes to either of you — the VFF in general.

Mr VALLANCE — I am not in the chicken industry, but I observe it. In my former role with PrimeSafe I was privy to various costs to that industry and how it operated, so I had a bit of experience then. I believe it is simply profit-taking out of a supply chain for a manufactured perception that their standard is higher than what is normal. It is simply a perception that they are portraying, that these animals are happier and better. I will use the case where I had the opportunity to visit a very large chicken farm. In the RSPCA-approved sheds there were hay bales — small hay bales had been placed in the sheds — for the chickens to allegedly perch on. When those chickens are put in those sheds, they are about that big. Hay bales are this big.

Mr BOURMAN — They are very acrobatic chickens.

Mr VALLANCE — I do not know how athletic a chicken is, but I do not believe they are that athletic. Then I thought, ‘When they get bigger, they’ll be that fat and heavy that if they fell off it, they’d break their leg anyway’. I asked a chicken farmer separately to that farmer, and he said, ‘Yes, that’s what happens’. The thing that I picked up on was that those hay bales are all bound with synthetic nylon twine. In the broadacre farming system a veterinarian would be absolutely horrified if a broadacre farmer left hay band in a paddock — absolutely horrified — because it kills the stock. It binds their stomach. What you get is synthetic particulate pollution of the stomach, and then in ruminants it actually binds into a large ball and starves the animal to death. I find it difficult to believe that those fibres would not have a similar effect in a chicken.

So the RSPCA are actually recommending animal cruelty, in my view, by making those farmers have those hay bales in the sheds. They are actually poisoning the chickens. A qualified veterinarian who has experience with chicken raising and animal nutrition would know that and would say that should not be done, yet they have chosen to take this standard and impose it on an industry because they have taken this level and developed this perception that it is higher than the norm.

Mr BOURMAN — Going back to the letter that you had saying they wanted to shut down the farming system, is that to do with eggs or is that just to do with — —

Mr AHMED — It is to do with egg production. They want to phase out the cage egg production system.

Mr BOURMAN — Full stop?

Mr AHMED — Full stop.

Mr BOURMAN — Again, if there were cruelty implications, they or the department of agriculture would, I presume, just charge people.

Mr AHMED — They would, yes.

The CHAIR — I was blown away by what you told me a moment ago. That is quite extraordinary.

Mr EIDEH — My question is that some stakeholders have suggested that animal cruelty enforcement in certain industries, such as livestock and hunting, should be managed by government agencies, such as Agriculture Victoria and the Game Management Authority. Do you think the RSPCA is the appropriate agency to investigate animal cruelty in these instances?

Mr VALLANCE — The VFF has a very strong view on the commercial harvesting of wildlife which requires the use of rifles to extinguish the life of a kangaroo or a deer so that they can enter the pet food supply chain. We believe that is a legitimate way to control the unnatural development of the kangaroo and deer populations, bearing in mind that deer are a feral animal in this country, even though they sit in a separate category, which I struggle to understand. The hunting of animals or the shooting of animals for the harvesting of commercial pet food we are very supportive of, and it should be regulated by the department of agriculture.

Those shooters or kangaroo harvesters should be licensed. There has been a trial going forward two and a half years. It has ceased now. My investigations have shown me that there were no incidents in food safety, animal welfare or any other instance with farmers, unlawful shooting or anything in that period of time. That should be maintained, that commercial activity.

With regard to recreational hunting, which I presume you are referring to, as a farmer, I have a complete ban on recreational hunting on my farm. It is only for the purposes of culling. I believe that recreational hunting today goes largely unregulated, and it comes with various social problems circulating around wild dogs and the release of dogs into the environment. I think that is a completely different issue to what we are discussing here today.

Mr BOURMAN — I am biting my tongue right now.

The CHAIR — Thank you indeed. Could I get back to your statement that in certain instances the RSPCA is actually promoting animal cruelty by a standard that they have set themselves. Where do they get that standard from?

Mr VALLANCE — I do not know. You would have to ask them.

The CHAIR — I will. Do not worry, I will.

Mr AHMED — They set their own.

The CHAIR — It just seems quite an extraordinary statement to hear anybody make — that the RSPCA would actually be promoting animal cruelty.

Mr VALLANCE — I take it this is the ideological crossing over from the sensible. Someone has said that the animals had to have perching in the sheds, so a small square hay bale seemed the easiest way to fix it without thinking about what the consequences are of that being introduced into the animal's environment. What are they going to eat off that? If you put painted things in there, they chip the paint off and eat the paint. That would cause problems, wouldn't it?

The CHAIR — It would.

Mr AHMED — Also in the egg industry we have three systems, of course, and if we were to go to all free range to appease people like RSPCA, we would have an increase of approximately 25 per cent in mortality rates. The reason we put them in sheds and cages in the first place was to protect them. As good farmers as we are, once we have got them out in the open, we have no control over wild birds, diseases, foxes, vermin —

things like that. They are asking us to put them all back out, so we can lose 20 per cent or 25 per cent more of our birds.

The CHAIR — Mr Ahmed, you made a statement earlier expressing some concern about the future of farming if some certainty was not given to farmers. Is that a serious threat? Do you think that the future of farming in certain instances is actually at risk as a result of some of this behaviour?

Mr AHMED — Yes. In the egg industry at the moment we as farmers are uncertain. We do not know what to invest in. We have a growing industry, but the most important thing is I have got two children who are involved in the business. By continually being badgered as she has been — on social media one of my daughters was attacked because she supported cage farming — they are starting to look at not staying in the industry. They do not want to be ridiculed as cruel, abusive people. Our concern mostly in the industry is that with all this confusion and uncertainty we are not reinvesting, and if we do not reinvest after the next few years, we will slowly go out of business. It is just the way business works. If you do not grow, you die.

The CHAIR — Regarding the letter that you received from the RSPCA proposing a phase-out of cage eggs, what would that do to the consumer market for eggs in Australia?

Mr AHMED — First of all, we still produce roughly 60 to 65 per cent cage eggs, and if we were to go to all free range, the consumer would be paying double the price of eggs they are now. It has already shown on the supermarket shelves, where cage eggs average around \$4 a dozen and free range are probably closer to \$8 a dozen. That is a concern for us. There are a lot of families who live on budgets, and we want to be able to produce food to feed every Australian, not just the ones who can afford it. So that is a concern to us in the industry.

My father grew up and I started farming when he migrated here from overseas for the sole purpose of feeding his family. It was not a business. Then from feeding his family we started feeding neighbours, because that is how farming was; you used to barter — a few eggs there, get a few vegies or milk and swap them — and then we started selling to the community and it grew from there. We get a lot of pleasure out of producing food and feeding people. It is something that is quite rewarding, so we want to continue to do it, but it is very hard when you are being accused of being cruel all the time by certain groups, especially the RSPCA, because they are probably a more respected group than, say, Animals Australia or Animal Liberation are.

The CHAIR — Do you think the RSPCA risk losing that respect if they keep going the way they are?

Mr AHMED — It has already lost it in the farming sector, so I do not know whether it will happen to the consumers about getting our message out so people understand that what we are doing is the right thing. We are not just cruel farmers in it for money.

Mr VALLANCE — I would just like to make one closing comment. In the farming industries, particularly in broadacre, through our levies the industry seeks to invest heavily in research and development of good animal welfare outcomes. We would prefer to lead our industry by example and provide good science in front of the community as to what gives the best outcome for the animal that we are going to eat at the end of the day rather than rely on an emotional argument about what is perceived to be right and wrong without good science to back it up. I believe that the RSPCA has moved into the Animals' Angels quarter instead of staying where they were and where they were respected by the wider community. They have actually lost substantial ground in the last five years by attempting to garner financial gain for themselves rather than benefit the animals, whether they be domestic or commercial.

The CHAIR — So do you think this change in attitude by the RSPCA has been done for an ideological reason, or is it done because it brings in more money for them?

Mr AHMED — I think they lost a lot of ground to other groups and they needed to move that way, otherwise they were not getting the funds.

Mr VALLANCE — They were fighting a turf war with Animals Australia, WSPA and all the other groups around the world. They could see that they were losing market share and sympathy. They were losing the empathy with the public, so they chose the option of going to the emotional rather than staying where they were and putting a better case and saying, 'These people over here, Animals Australia and so forth, aren't actually

interested in animal welfare; they're interested in closing down meat production for humans to eat'. That is the basis of their organisation: to cease animal production and agriculture instead of staying where they originally were and prosecuting the case that an animal does have an expectation to have a good life while it is being cared for, and the people that look after those animals have a responsibility, and they should do it.

Ms HARTLAND — Can you just explain a bit more about what you are talking about in terms of the levies?

Mr VALLANCE — The levies? They are in legislation. I will stick with the cattle because I know it really well. The cattle levy is \$3.56 — it goes to Meat and Livestock Australia — which is used for marketing and research and development. That budget is split, and it is reviewed annually by the Cattle Council of Australia, the Sheepmeat Council of Australia and the Goat Industry Council of Australia, and the board has to adhere to the recommendations of those peak bodies. The remainder of that levy is used for a thing called the national residue survey, which examines samples of meat in abattoirs for chemical residues, and then there is the Animal Health Australia portion, which is used for the benefit of welfare of animals in Australia to develop good animal welfare practices throughout Australia.

There is also a CDCF, which is the cattle disease compensation fund, which allows payments to be made to cattle farmers who lose animals through disease. In Victoria we also have a cattle transaction levy, which goes to the Cattle Compensation Fund, which is used to fund animal welfare and industry development programs in the industry. Case in point is the VFF in July will start a new program of the peri-urban farming sector to advise them on best animal welfare practices and biosecurity on farms in Victoria, and that is aimed at the person with one goat and two sheep.

Ms HARTLAND — So with the research element of it, can you just give us one or two examples of the kind of research that has been used?

Mr VALLANCE — The MLA invested heavily over about a 15-year period in the beef CRCs. There were one, two and three CRCs. The CRC program — —

Ms HARTLAND — A CRC is?

Mr VALLANCE — Cooperative research centre, which was based in Armidale. The first CRC was based around productivity and economics and better environmental work, the second one was largely based on genetics and finding the right genetics for the various climates and the Australian landscape, and then the third CRC developed that further and also did a program on maternal efficiency, which looked at the genetics of mobilising the internal fat in the cow to mobilise it to provide more milk for the calf and to produce a better carcass when it was sold as a cold cow.

Ms HARTLAND — And what would the welfare programs be?

Mr VALLANCE — The MLA have ongoing welfare programs, and they are done in collaboration with donor companies, which could be various universities or departments of agriculture right around Australia. There is quite a list of them.

Mr AHMED — The Australian egg industry also has a levy of about 40 cents a bird, which goes to the Australian Egg Corporation. There are two components, one in marketing and the other one in R and D, and there is a lot of work getting done in improving animal welfare, salmonella and things like that.

Mr VALLANCE — A good example of the animal welfare would be the fit-to-load regulations, which were developed in the cattle and sheep industry. We now have a booklet which is available to every farmer. It is given to them free of charge. It describes the various states of an animal which cannot be put on a vehicle to be transported or it must be destroyed. That was developed by Animal Health Australia, the cattle council and the MLA to provide industry with a very good educational tool to allow transport operators to say, 'I will not load those stock on this truck'. An abattoir will not accept animals in that condition, because they are subject to audit by PrimeSafe, so they have a regulatory oversight there as well. That is where some of those levy dollars go in promoting that sort of thing and developing those standards.

They looked at the length of transport for an animal on a truck, and they trialled and set up a road train. One trailer would be unloaded every 2 hours, and they monitored the animals for heart rate, body temperature,

weight loss, water consumption — they examined them to the nth degree — and they quite clearly established that it was better to leave the cow on the truck the entire journey than to take it on and off four times a day. So that is where we came up with the national transport standards in Australia, where it is now legal to transport cattle and sheep for set periods of time and then they have to be unloaded, fed and watered and rested for a period of time. That work was all based on science, not on an emotional rhetoric by any one group. It was done by universities in collaboration with Meat and Livestock Australia.

The CHAIR — Gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us today. You will receive a transcript of today's proceedings in the not-too-distant future. If you could check that for any obvious errors, not that there will be any, but if there are just let us know and we will certainly rectify them. Thank you very much for your very important contribution today.

Witnesses withdrew.