

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria**

Melbourne – Tuesday 26 March 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Georgie Purcell – Chair

David Davis – Deputy Chair

John Berger

Katherine Copsy

Bev McArthur

Tom McIntosh

Evan Mulholland

Sonja Terpstra

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Gaelle Broad

Georgie Crozier

David Ettershank

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Sarah Mansfield

Rachel Payne

**WITNESSES**

Rebecca Cook, Head of Prevention, and

Mhairi Roberts, Policy and Advocacy Manager, RSPCA Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any members of the public watching via the live broadcast.

To kick off, we will just get committee members to introduce themselves. We will go with the screen first. Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

**John BERGER:** John Berger, Southern Metropolitan Region.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Hi, I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Mhairi Roberts, RSPCA Victoria.

**Rebecca COOK:** Rebecca Cook, RSPCA Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful, thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 to 15 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion and questions.

**Rebecca COOK:** Great, thank you. Thank you for inviting us to speak here today; we are grateful for the opportunity to present to the committee. RSPCA policy, agreed by all member societies, is that the RSPCA advocates for the humane treatment of all farm animals. RSPCA believes it is important to work with the farming community and other stakeholders to effect positive change and improve animal welfare. We believe that good animal welfare must be an inherent part of farm animal production. Good animal welfare must involve providing animals with good nutrition, a suitable environment, good health, the ability to express innate behaviours and the opportunity to experience positive effective states and therefore have a good quality of life. While we acknowledge the improvements made by the industry to progress pig welfare to date, we have four areas where we believe further improvements could be made. One is around close confinement, such as the use of sow stalls, farrowing crates and boar stalls; the second is around barren environments and a lack of enrichment; the third is around painful piglet husbandry procedures; and the fourth is around stunning methods.

Firstly, I will start with confinement. RSPCA was very supportive of the Australian pig industry voluntarily phasing out the use of sow stalls by 2017. Australian Pork Limited reported in 2017 that approximately 80 per cent of sows were in sow stall free production systems. To address the remaining sow stall systems, we believe legislation should be introduced to phase out sow stalls. The use of conventional farrowing crates should also be phased out in Victoria and replaced with systems that allow sows to move freely, including standing up, lying down and turning around. Boars should also be housed in pens, and the pens should provide sufficient space to allow for boars to move around freely, including standing up, lying down and turning around. When it comes to space requirements, the minimum space for growing pigs should provide freedom to move and the ability to perform highly motivated behaviours including, for all pigs, foraging and exploring, as well as nesting for pregnant sows. Factors that can impact the minimum space requirements that pigs need should be considered, such as type of flooring, presence of bedding, temperature, humidity, group size and overall quality of the space.

Secondly, while the quantity of space is important, so is providing enrichment opportunities. As discussed in our submission, pigs are curious social animals, so allowing them to forage, build nests and explore is vital for good welfare. For example, prior to farrowing sows often want to build a nest for their piglets. Providing straw or hessian sacks for them to undertake this activity has been found to improve sow and piglet welfare.

Thirdly, there are several invasive and painful husbandry procedures that are performed routinely on piglets, which include castration, tail docking and teeth clipping. Following these painful procedures, piglets show signs consistent with pain and distress. In Australia piglets do not have to be provided with any form of best practice pain relief for routine painful husbandry procedures. We believe that where painful procedures continue, pain relief should be mandated. Where alternative management strategies are available, painful procedures should be phased out.

Finally, with stunning prior to slaughter we believe it is vital that the identification and commercialisation of alternative stunning methods for pigs are made a priority to improve pig welfare at slaughter. This will likely require significant investment in research and collaboration between industry, government and overseas counterparts. We welcome any questions the committee may have.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you very much. I think we might start in the room again and then move to the screen, so we will kick off with Ms Copsey.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for attending today, and thank you for your submission. You have covered some of the topics that I wanted to delve into, specifically around confinement, sow stalls, farrowing crates and boar stalls, which I always forget. We just heard from the department around the development of the national standards, where Victoria is at in relation to reforming POCTA and the availability of guidelines. I am interested in your views on the time lines for development of national standards and whether you think that work is going to proceed apace. That is obviously a good thing, but should that be a barrier to Victoria making some advancements on these welfare issues on its own?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Our understanding with the development of national standards for pig welfare – so not the slaughtering standards, which are a separate piece – is that I do not think any jurisdiction has committed to leading that review of those standards and guidelines. So we would really strongly encourage the Victorian government to lead that review, and in lieu of that, if that was not possible, to then look at the Victorian standards and guidelines for pigs and to look at updating those so that the Victorian legislation remains contemporary. I believe the Victorian standards and guidelines for pigs were published around 2012, so they are starting to age now, and we know that there has been more science conducted since then. I think for the national standards and guidelines process there was a really live literature review done in 2018 which did make some recommendations for improvements that can be made. So we think it would be timely to look at the legislative framework and make any updates to ensure that it is based on contemporary animal welfare science but it is also meeting community expectations.

**Katherine COPSEY:** And that work, if undertaken by Victoria, could then feed into the national process?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Ideally, it would be great if the Victorian government would lead the national review process. I think that is really important because it ensures consistency of animal welfare standards across the

country, and we know that it is important for industry too to have that shared equal footing in terms of the standards that they need to adhere to and comply with. It is also of benefit to all animals across the country.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. I am very interested in your comments around density and intensity of pig farming operations and the way that that contributes to a need for some of the practices that are no doubt causing pain – the procedures around teeth clipping and tail amputation. Are you aware of other jurisdictions that are looking at the intensity or perhaps the pig per square metre regulations and whether that is enabling other industries – indeed here in Victoria I heard from some pork industry operators – to do away with those procedures?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** You would have seen in our submission that we did put some information in there around an elementary equation that looks at the space for pigs so that they can perform certain behaviours. In other jurisdictions there is a greater space allowance than what is currently written into our standards and guidelines, so we think that, yes, it would be really beneficial to look at those jurisdictions and work towards making those changes. We know that some painful procedures are performed in order to, I suppose, mitigate other welfare impacts. I think tail docking is probably a really good example of that. We know that it is used as a preventative to stop tail biting, which is obviously also a welfare problem. We think that eventually we would like to see that phased out, but we think if it is to continue because of the way the system is managed that pain relief should be provided until such time we can change the production system to support the fact that there would not be a need for it anymore.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. I hear you in relation to your recommendations around farrowing stalls also being phased out over time. In the interim, during that phase-out period, do you have a view on the current dimensions that sow crates, boar stalls and farrowing crates are permitted to be and whether that is currently meeting animal welfare guidelines around pigs' ability to stand, sit, stretch?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think our view on those close confinement systems is that they should be phased out because pigs cannot turn around. If you are using sow stalls or conventional farrowing crates specifically, pigs can essentially stand up and lie down but they cannot turn around. Our view is that pigs should be able to turn around. I think we did put some information around space requirements in our submission that we would like to see, but, yes, I suppose we can take that on notice and come back to you with a response on that one.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Great. Thank you, that is very helpful. Turning to practices, the end-of-life slaughter practices, are you aware of internationally any examples that Victoria could look to in terms of countries that have supported research into alternative practices, or is this somewhere where we would be forging ahead?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think that is one where we have identified that there is more research that is needed. We acknowledge that with all the different types of stunning systems, there are problems with them. We think we definitely could look internationally. I am not aware of any I suppose really high welfare preslaughter stunning in other jurisdictions, but very happy to come back and provide a response to the committee on that too.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. And I am interested in your reflection on your participation, obviously, in a number of engagements and working groups and taskforces. Do you feel that with our practice in Victoria and in Australia that animal welfare is being given enough attention as part of those engagement processes? It is difficult. I do not want to put you in a difficult position in answering this, but do you have frustrations around the way that we approach engagement on these issues, and do you feel that occasionally greater weight is being given or has been given in the past to economic and industrial imperatives versus animal welfare? Can you speak to that tension?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, I think we can talk to that, probably particularly from the national review process. So we have very much been on the record saying we have got concerns with the fact that the Australian animal welfare standards – essentially that process was disbanded I think many years ago, so I think that was definitely of great concern. I think having national leadership on animal welfare is very important. Without that, I suppose states and territories then have to go it alone, as it were, and then that has implications for having national consistency. I think there have been improvements in terms of regulatory impact statements much more recently putting some emphasis on animal welfare and having that as a merit as part of those statements, but I

would say historically, yes, they very much have focused much more on the economic side of it, with less attention to the animal welfare components.

**Katherine COPSEY:** I am interested because we do not want to end up – if all our regulations are doing is legislating or putting into mandatory practice current industry practices, then I would see that there is a bit of a gap in achieving better animal welfare outcomes through that process, if they are not actually moving the goalposts.

**Rebecca COOK:** We certainly see that there is room for continuous improvement, and that is sort of the philosophy that we take into it.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** And I think that speaks to as well – we were saying before about needing to update standards and guidelines at regular intervals so that they do I suppose stay up to date with current science as well.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Would you have a recommendation around the frequency of updates? You said continuous, but in terms of updating – for example, it has been a long time coming the update to POCTA – I would see that there would be merit in a more regular review of the regs and guidelines to keep up with current science. Do you have a view on what would be practical?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, I think it is interesting, our current regulatory framework. We have a lot of codes of practice that sit under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*. Some of them are very, very old. Possibly some of them have not been reviewed in decades. I suppose the benefit of the regulations is they do sunset after 10 years, so there is a requirement when they sunset that there is a consultation and then they are revised, so I think that is really helpful. I would love to see more of the content from codes put in regulations so that there is a mechanism for review. I think that would be really helpful. In terms of the standards and guidelines under the *Livestock Management Act*, I am not sure if there is a mechanism there that is mandated for that review, but it would be good if it at least aligned with the requirement for regulations to be reviewed every 10 years.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thanks very much.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Copsey, last question.

**Katherine COPSEY:** That is actually me for now, Ms Purcell.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thanks, Ms Copsey. Ms Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you very much for coming today and for your submission. How does the RSPCA support and collaborate with the pig industry to ensure continuous improvement in animal welfare?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Did you want to take this one, Bec?

**Rebecca COOK:** Yes, sure. We have an advocacy framework that we work to, which involves us using the evidence, understanding the views, and through this we often engage with industry and collaborate with industry. We often meet with industry organisations and collaborate with them. We are always happy to have a conversation and work together. In this regard in Victoria we often meet with the Victorian Farmers Federation and discuss with them issues that apply to both of our organisations. At RSPCA Australia they have the approved farming scheme, and they work with pig producers through that scheme to improve farming practices.

**Gaelle BROAD:** So do you guys have any sort of direct relationships with the pork industry or the pig industry? How often are you meeting with them to discuss?

**Rebecca COOK:** We do not meet directly with the pork industry. That is fair to say. We would meet with the Victorian Farmers Federation. We have in the past, though, met with members of the pork industry, but we do not have a regular schedule of meetings.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Our national office, though, I think does meet with the national pork industry body, so there is also a relationship from a federal level.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay, great. I saw in your submission you said there is clear evidence of the considerable progress that has been made in recent years to improve animal welfare. Could you talk to that and provide some examples of successful collaboration or some of these improvements that you have seen?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, I think, as Bec mentioned in the opening statement, the fact that the pork industry voluntarily committed to phasing out sow stalls is a really, really great improvement. Obviously we would like to see – I think it was the majority; they said it was 80 per cent that had phased them out – the rest phased out, but I think that is a really great demonstration of a voluntary commitment by industry to do that. We know that the production systems have become more professional. I think we spoke to that in our submission as well. We definitely think there is still a ways to go with some things that do have a negative welfare impact. We spoke to the painful husbandry procedures that piglets are subjected to. There are some issues still with confinement as well as preslaughter practices, and we think enrichment as well is another key area where some improvements can be made. So we think that they have come a long way, but there is still a way to go.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay, great. So just with these advancements in animal welfare, are there specific areas that have been industry led as opposed to from your side of things? You sort of spoke a little bit to that, but do you want to expand on that?

**Rebecca COOK:** I think sow stalls is the idea that comes to mind in terms of that, but I do note that in having a look at the Australian Pork Limited website there are a lot of research and development projects that seem to be either completed or current, and some of those do have an animal welfare angle, so it is great to see and very pleasing to see some of that activity.

**Gaelle BROAD:** That is great. Recommendation 1 in your submission suggests leading the national standards and guidelines review process with a view to updating the *Victorian Standards and Guidelines for the Welfare of Pigs* based on contemporary scientific knowledge. What specific scientific knowledge are you referring to in that recommendation?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think, looking at other international jurisdictions, we can see that some countries have started to address some of those key issues that we spoke about in terms of limiting the use of sow stalls or banning the use of sow stalls altogether, in terms of moving towards free farrowing systems for pigs, provision of enrichment items – in some other jurisdictions there are requirements to provide a greater remit of enrichment items. It is things like that. There was a really great review that was undertaken in 2018 looking at all the literature, which I think was undertaken by the Animal Welfare Science Centre, who I think you might be talking to as well, so I think they can definitely speak to the science and the progress that has been made over time.

**Gaelle BROAD:** We have talked a lot about the reliance that we have on importing pork products. Can you talk a bit about Australia's industry, the Victorian industry, and how it compares to other countries and their standards – like the USA?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I suppose what we would say up-front is that we acknowledge that there are countries where the animal welfare standards are not as great as in Australia, and certainly if we improve our animal welfare standards we would want to restrict any imports that come from a lower standard than we currently have because we would not want the Victorian or the Australian industry to be at a disadvantage.

**Gaelle BROAD:** It is a significant amount, isn't it, our reliance on international products, so –

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad, last question

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay, sure. I am just interested in the regulatory frameworks and the frequency and independence of the audits that are undertaken to ensure compliance of good animal welfare. If you could talk to the audits – who does the audits and who pays for the audits?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** In terms of our approved farming scheme or in terms of third-party assurance schemes that industry use?

**Gaëlle BROAD:** I am happy for you to cover both briefly if that is okay.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** In terms of the approved farming scheme, it is run by our national office – by RSPCA Australia. My understanding is that there are two on-farm audits every year. They also do an assessment of the abattoirs. Abattoirs are not accredited, but they are assessed because there are standards around how pigs are stunned and slaughtered before they are processed. There is also an assessment of livestock transporters at point of loading and unloading as well, which I think is conducted annually. That is all conducted by RSPCA Australia, and they have RSPCA Australia assessors who do those audits. I cannot really speak to industry assurance schemes. That is not something that we are involved in or familiar with, but we do acknowledge the role that third-party assessments can make. We definitely think that animal welfare should be an important part of those assessments as well.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you. And thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ms Broad. Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming today. I am just wondering, have you ever visited any commercial pig farms?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, we have. Tim Kingma, who came to present to you – we actually went out and looked at his farm late last year, I think it was.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And how did you find that?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think we could definitely see how they have used a lot of automation in terms of their facility, which I think is really great. They had a really good focus on use of technology and using that in their facility. I think a lot of their sows are group housed, which is something that we are really supportive of. There are definitely some practices on farm that I think are very much still the standard for industry in terms of conventional farrowing crates, which we would like to see phased out, but I would say that we really appreciated the fact that he was happy to have us on-farm so that we could have a look firsthand and get a really good understanding about their practices. Did you want to add anything to that, Bec?

**Rebecca COOK:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** We do hear a lot about biosecurity. Did you feel that that farm took biosecurity seriously?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes.

**Rebecca COOK:** We did indeed.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Oh, tell us about it.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** They had very strict biosecurity practices. We showered in and showered out of that farm and they made sure that we were provided with clothing to wear as well. So we very much acknowledge the importance of biosecurity and the need for that on-farm and we know that it also has an animal welfare implication as well to have good biosecurity practices.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you would agree it would be an issue if people illegally trespassed onto a farm, given the security you went through, and that there would be implications for animal welfare.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, we definitely do not condone illegal activity, and farm trespass is part of that. We acknowledge that that does pose a biosecurity risk on farm. In saying that we are not aware of any cases where there has been a disease outbreak, but we definitely acknowledge the reason why there are biosecurity practices in place.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And would you agree that any changes that you might be recommending should be based on science and not ideology?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes.

**Rebecca COOK:** Yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And what scientific evidence would you support that would support the changes?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Any peer-reviewed scientific literature that is conducted by, I suppose, appropriate scientists would be standard.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Animal welfare standards in the USA have been ranked considerably lower compared to other developed countries, which is unfortunate. So you have agreed that we are way ahead of the USA in terms of our animal welfare standards for pigs?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, that is correct. I think we spoke to that in our submission.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So if we were to close down the pig industry, which is what the animal activist industry have confirmed they would require, how would we go about providing that source of protein to the Victorian and Australian public, and how would we deal with the poorer welfare standards of products coming from other countries?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** We very much do not think that the Victorian pork industry should be shut down, and that is not a suggestion that we have made. We know that the majority of Australians eat meat, and we think that we should work with industry to try and make welfare improvements and have continuous improvement. But we will always want to work with the farming community to make changes, and we in no way are looking to shut down the industry. So I am not sure that from our perspective I can answer that question.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Would you say in your understanding that the farming community has been cooperative and welcoming to your involvement in ensuring there are good animal welfare standards?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, I think so.

**Rebecca COOK:** From our personal experience.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Is there any way we could improve that?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I do not know. This is why we do have regular meetings, I suppose, with industry bodies such as the Victorian Farmers Federation, so that we can build really good relationships with key stakeholders so that if there is an issue we have that kind of open door where we can have ongoing conversations.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And you have generally found them to be cooperative and prepared to listen to your concerns as well?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, very much so.

**The CHAIR:** Last question, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Are there any benefits whatsoever to the use of sow stalls in a short period of time, until we perhaps phase them out totally?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think the EU does use them for a very restricted amount of time, so I think we could look to other jurisdictions. But I think if the majority of the industry has already phased them out, then I really do not think there is a significant barrier to taking that next step and mandating a phase-out of sow stalls.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you so much.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Thank you.

**Rebecca COOK:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. I will go now, unless you want to go, Mr Berger. I saw you unmuted yourself.



**John BERGER:** I am ready to go, so I did not get caught out unmuting myself.

**The CHAIR:** Go for it. You go before me.

**John BERGER:** I think there has always got to be one, and I put my hand up to be it today. Thank you for your appearance today and your submission. Most of my questions have been answered through what you see as global best practice, but I am keen now to understand a bit more about your advocacy framework and how that works in terms of how the issues are brought forward and how they are dealt with through that framework.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Do you want to start with that one?

**Rebecca COOK:** Yes, definitely. The way our framework works is we identify issues that impact the greatest number of animals. We identify issues based on the number of animals impacted, the likelihood of change in that area and also how viable a change might be, so when we have selected an advocacy issue we then look to the evidence and seek to understand the industry and the information around it. We will go out and do visits to locations, for example, and talk to people within the industries. We will get the facts, we will look at the risks and we will work with stakeholders to advocate for any improvements that we think can be made based on the evidence and the science.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think just to add to that, we also have a stakeholder engagement strategy that goes alongside our advocacy framework. We have a really good understanding of who might have an interest in particular issues so that we can ensure that we meet with as many people as we can, understand their views and then see how we might be able to work with them to make changes.

**John BERGER:** And then what happens to the outcome of the work that you do in that space? Where does that then go?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** It probably depends on the issue that we are advocating on – what the outcome of that might be. It is probably quite specific. It might be a longer term prospect I suppose in terms of things that we might be asking for. Sometimes it might be seeking out change in industry practice. Sometimes it might be seeking changing government policy or updates to legislation, so I think it would really depend on the particular issue.

**Rebecca COOK:** The types of tools we might use – for example, we might use surveying, we might look at lit reviews, we might run pilots and we might gather data from different methods.

**John BERGER:** I had just one more curious question, I suppose. Did you participate in the consultative process for the new Act that is coming into place?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, we submitted our submission yesterday.

**Rebecca COOK:** Just in time.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Just in time, at the eleventh hour.

**John BERGER:** I think that is all I have, Chair. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Berger. You have spoken a little bit about I guess some of the changes that the pork industry has made, but what is the ideal environment for pigs?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Group housing of sows is something that I think would be really beneficial, and we know that there are also some outdoor and free-range systems where sows have a lot more room to move. But I think space provision is really key as well as – and I think Bec spoke to this earlier – the quality of the space.

**Rebecca COOK:** Enrichment.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think that would be really helpful, and as Bec was saying just then, provision of enrichment too. I think they would be really key, but those close confinement systems are something that we really want to move away from. We know that there are alternatives to those, so that is what we would like to see. In terms of conventional farrowing crates, moving to loose farrowing systems, sow stalls moving to group

housing, boar stalls moving to pens where boars have much more space and can turn around freely – I think they are probably –

**Rebecca COOK:** With those painful procedures, either we would like to see pain relief mandated or for there to be alternatives for those painful procedures. In terms of stunning, we really do think there is a need to look at other methods.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just on enrichment, could you tell us a little bit about access to substrate, the importance of that for pigs and I guess the impact of not having it.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Yes, definitely. We know that pigs have highly motivated or innate behaviours that they want to perform, and I think a key one in this respect is for sows to be able to perform nesting behaviours prior to farrowing. We think that that is something where provision of enrichment – I think Bec spoke to provision of straw or hessian sacks so that they can fulfil that behaviour and meet that need – we know that the science says that has improvements not only for sow welfare but also for piglet welfare, so we think that would be a really useful provision; and then enrichment items for pigs as they are grown out as well so that they are not in a barren environment and they are able to perform those foraging and exploring behaviours, which as I said, they are quite highly motivated to perform.

**Rebecca COOK:** And I think there are some good examples in our submission in regard to the EU and the suggestions on mandated areas for materials for enrichment that they suggest.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you. Just on CO<sub>2</sub>, we have had witnesses tell us and submissions tell us that the RSPCA approves of this as a stunning method. Has your position changed?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** We do know, and I did say earlier, that there are issues with all the stunning systems that are currently in practice for pigs. We know the CO<sub>2</sub> is, I suppose, what we call aversive, so there are welfare impacts on the pigs as part of that stunning system. However, we also acknowledge that it is currently a commercially viable system that we have in Australia, and there are not I suppose any currently available commercially viable alternatives to that, which is why we have recommended as part of our submission that we look at investing in research and development to find relatively more humane alternatives to that system.

**Rebecca COOK:** That said, we do also put in our submission that we believe that back-loading so pigs at least are together rather than in single file to reduce stress, could – if you can say make improvements to the system – improve it.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. Picking up on sow stalls as well, obviously the fact that the industry has complied with their voluntary phase-out, for the most part, is a good thing, but we know that not everyone has. Do you think the only solution to this is legislating a ban and ensuring that it is complied with?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think that is a good question. I think because the majority of the industry has voluntarily committed to the phase-out, probably what is left is – you know, utilising that mandate through legislation would then push the minority across the line to work towards a phase-out, and that is something that we would like to see.

**The CHAIR:** Just lastly, we have had a previous witness tell us that pain relief for piglets is probably not an effective measure because it is more stressful for a pig to be picked up once and given anaesthetic and then picked up again half an hour later for the procedure. What would the RSPCA say about this?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I think there is a piece there about socialisation of pigs in terms of people handling them and how that can also be a positive for welfare if it is done really well in a low-stress situation. So I think it is probably a multifaceted issue, and I think you would need to look at the difference between the welfare impacts that we are speaking about here. But I would say that some of those procedures that are undertaken on piglets are really painful, and where they are to occur I would say in the intermediary pain relief should be mandated. But ideally if we can introduce alternative practices where they are not needed, that would be in the absolute best interests of the piglets.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. I agree. That is my time. Do any members in the room have any further questions?

**Katherine COPSEY:** I will ask some again, if you can hear me.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Of course, Ms Copsey. Go for it.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. We spoke a little bit about the ability for Victoria to lead in this space. I wanted to understand the time frames that we are talking about here. We have seen some very incremental change over time and great change around density limits in other industries – for example, around battery hen and intensive poultry farming. What kind of time frame should Victoria be aiming for in order to be influential in the development of the national pig welfare standards?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** It is a tricky question to answer, I suppose. But I would say it is concerning –

**Katherine COPSEY:** If you can go into more detail than ASAP.

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I would say it is concerning that no jurisdiction has committed to leading that process, because if we look at the development of the poultry standards, for example, I think the development just of the standards alone took around eight years. So that is quite a significant amount of time that it took to reach agreement on those and then have them agreed by the meeting of the agriculture ministers at the federal level. And then after that it needs to be written into state and territory legislation, so it is quite a significantly protracted process. I think it should take less time than that ideally. I think eight years is definitely too long for a standards development process, but I think not having any jurisdiction even commit to review those standards is something that we would really encourage the Victorian government to commit to, because if we have not even committed to reviewing them and then we know it could take several years to write them and then have them written into state legislation, it is a long time.

**Katherine COPSEY:** And it does sound, from the evidence that the inquiry has heard so far, as though there have been significant advances in common industry practice that are probably not reflected in the standards currently, so that there is significant improvement that could be achieved, even without setting strict goals, just recognising the progress that has been made. Can I ask: with other standards review practices, how useful has it been to have a mandatory regulation to work towards rather than, for example, leaving it to industry to come up with voluntary practices? Have we seen significant welfare improvements result from mandatory goal-setting through regulation for welfare?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** It probably does depend on the industry. Some will be, I suppose, more progressive than others, and it can depend on how intensively farmed animals are as well. I do not think legislation is always going to be the answer; I think it can be really helpful to provide industry with some certainty around what the minimum standards are, but we would always encourage producers in the industry to go beyond minimum standards where they can. Also I suppose it is really helpful for forward thinking where we know that we are going to update standards regularly. If you start working beyond the minimum standards knowing that there will be continuous improvement and that standards will be updated on a regular review cycle, it means we can keep improving welfare over time.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Chair, can I just ask a question, if there is still time?

**Katherine COPSEY:** I am done, so yes.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Are you done, Katherine? Yes? Okay. I am just wondering: we have talked about pain relief options; do you know of any registered pain relief options that could be used on piglets?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** I will take that question on notice, if that is okay, and provide a response.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Does the RSPCA, by chance, invest in animal welfare research?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** Our federal body, RSPCA Australia, does run a scholarship program every year, and one of those scholarships is for research into humane animal production, so people undertaking research can apply for that scholarship.

**Bev McARTHUR:** But that is all? RSPCA across Australia does not actually do any major research into it?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** We do not have a major research fund, no.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, okay. Okay, thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mrs McArthur. I also just have one final one, and then we will wrap up. Does the RSPCA think that CCTV in slaughterhouses and factory farms would improve transparency?

**Mhairi ROBERTS:** With CCTV, specifically in abattoirs and knackeries, this was actually an election ask that we took to the 2022 election that was endorsed by government, particularly in abattoirs and knackeries, where animals are already highly stressed. They have been transported, which we know is inherently stressful. They might be mixed with unfamiliar animals, and there can be thermal impacts of those facilities as well. We think that there is a really great role that CCTV can play in those facilities in terms of assisting with monitoring compliance from an animal welfare perspective but also for increasing community confidence in those facilities. So we think that it definitely has a role to play in abattoirs and knackeries, and we would love to see government progress the implementation of that.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you very much. Well, we might wrap it up there. Thanks so much for coming along today, and my apologies for appearing on the screen and for the technical difficulties, but we got there. That concludes the hearing.

**Witnesses withdrew.**