T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Melbourne—Monday, 23 September 2019

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WITNESS

Associate Professor Andrew Robinson, Director, Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis, University of Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings 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 this privilege. Before we start, can you please state your name for the Hansard record. And please allow us some time to ask you questions. Welcome, Professor.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Thank you. My name is Andrew Robinson.

The CHAIR: Do you want us to go directly to questions or do you want—

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: I am happy to go directly to questions.

Mr GEPP: Thanks for coming along today, Professor. I am just wondering if you might share a little bit of information and knowledge with us about the research that you undertake for Melbourne Uni.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Certainly. So CEBRA is the Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis, and we undertake research on behalf of the Australian Government and the New Zealand Government as agreed by those bodies. Our goal is to construct tools and frameworks that are used by people who advise the decision-makers. So we do not advise; we cogitate.

Mr GEPP: I note that in particular you talk about biosecurity and risk analysis, and we have heard a lot throughout this year about the issue of biosecurity. I am wondering if you might again share your knowledge and expertise on the importance of biosecurity, particularly in the context of the matters that we are dealing with from farms through the supply chain.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Surely; thank you. So biosecurity is probably the most complex area of public policy because of the vastly complex arrangements of objectives and constraints. Biosecurity protects human immunity; it protects human health. It protects agricultural health, economic health and environmental health, and it does so as a delicate balance of rights and obligations on all stakeholders.

Mr GEPP: How fragile is it? How fragile is the system?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: I do not know how to measure the fragility of the system, but I would say as a general rule it is not particularly fragile. It is important to recognise that it is easy to identify biosecurity with the activities that have taken place at the border, but there are a plethora of activities going on before the border and after the border, and oftentimes the detection of an incursion after the border is a sign that the system is working and not that the system is not working. There are some things that simply cannot be caught at a port.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you very much, Professor, for coming here today. Australia does take biosecurity obviously very seriously, because we all know as we come into this country we are checked for mud on our shoes, wooden products, meat products et cetera. We have got dogs roaming around airports making sure we do not bring any of these products in that can interfere with our, I would have thought, fragile agricultural activities here, because we are an island so we can keep at bay most diseases that are causing grave damage across wider areas in the world. Is it important that we take biosecurity seriously as individuals in this country?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: I think that is the most important thing we can do. Biosecurity is as much a sociological challenge as it is a biological challenge. The vast majority of biosecurity risks arise as a consequence of human decisions and human actions. Oftentimes those actions are merely thoughtless or accidental, but sometimes they are maleficent. Consequently human engagement with biosecurity is extremely important.

Mrs McARTHUR: And so if we do not take biosecurity seriously, what impact are you able to estimate that would have on our export and even domestic industry that involves agriculture?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: It would be vast. I cannot put an exact number on it. In fact that is a project that my centre is undertaking at the moment, due to be wrapped up in a few months—stay tuned—

Mrs McARTHUR: We look forward to it.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: to estimate the value of the biosecurity system. But we are not ready yet.

Mr MEDDICK: Look, we have had a number of hearings, as you are probably aware, in various places—here at the Parliament and also out in the country areas. One could be forgiven, if you were a casual observer from the outside, for thinking that our biosecurity levels on farms in Victoria are so high that every single animal—be it a chicken, a cow or a sheep, every time they move from farm to farm through a sale, one farmer buying another one's stock et cetera or whether they go from farm to saleyard or from saleyard to slaughterhouse—has their feet doused in some sort of antibiotic or that they are washed down or that the trucks themselves, the trays that they go on, the ramps, every single one of them, are completely sterile. That is just simply not the case, is it? Because we have all seen trucks driving down the road and all sorts of effluents and dust and things flying out. We have all seen the trucks that leave farms. The animals are just loaded straight up from where they are in the paddock, in the holding pen, going straight onto that truck and going out the gate. We have all seen that. But one would be forgiven for thinking that is not the case. Given that these movements of animals, wherever they are going to, number in the millions per year, versus how many people might partake in unauthorised farm access—and I note that you are from the Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis—can you please weigh up for me the amount of risk that one represents versus the other?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: No, I cannot.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Professor, for being here today. What we have heard at a variety of our hearings, in Warragul, Bairnsdale, Warrnambool and Horsham, is certainly that when illegal on-farm trespass occurs, often very early in the morning, but not always—and also at abattoirs, we have also heard—the participants, I will say, are often in black clothing. They will wear boots, that are certainly their own, I am assuming—there are no white lab coats and covered boots. This certainly can be a pathway for pathogens to go on farm or on livestock enterprise. What I would like you to do, and you can pick any of your favourites, I guess, is show the pathway of a pathogen—I will pick Q fever, if that is something that you know, or another entity; that would be fine—how it can spread and at what magnitude it can spread.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: That is a great question, but it is quite a complicated modelling exercise if I were to do it to my satisfaction. But I am happy to trace out the broad scale and steps. It is known that, for example, wildfowl populations are infected with—not all of them, but many of them—a low-pathogenic avian influenza, so wild ducks and wild geese flying around the country. And there is nothing we can do about it; they just have this disease. Now, these animals will arrive at dams on farms and they will do what ducks do—they will defecate everywhere. And if that dam is then accessed by poultry, then the poultry, the chickens, sometimes will eat the matter and there can be a transmission of the avian influenza to the chickens. And then the chickens, the flock itself, become essentially a breeding magnifier for the avian influenza. And then a person who might arrive at that poultry installation could walk through the area where the chickens are being held and pick up soil or faecal matter, pick it up on their boots and then move to another place and deposit it again. Does that answer your question?

Ms BATH: Yes. And I guess then the question would go to: what can be the outcome of that sort of an illness on that property?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: So if the low-pathogenic avian influenza becomes high-pathogenic avian influenza, then that would entail the devitalisation of the flock, so they would have to kill them all.

Ms BATH: And we have also heard, or it has been in the media, that there has been an incident of a pig farm who have had activists come onto their property over a period of time and that the occurrence of this Q fever—I think I am saying that correctly—has been increased and they have had to put measures in, quite significant measures, to mitigate the spread of disease. My question is: once a disease has come on farm what are some of the ways that a farmer would deal with that?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Some of the measures that the farmer would take would be quarantining the ill animals, so separating them so they are no longer in contact with the healthy animals. They could kill some of the animals, or they could vaccinate if a vaccine is available and if vaccination is an accepted treatment, which would depend on a range of factors.

Ms BATH: And the vaccination, Professor, what would that look like and how long would that have to go on? Would it be ongoing?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: It varies. Sometimes there would be a one-off treatment, and if the pathogen were likely to remain, then you would need to continue that program.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thank you, Associate Professor Robinson. Thanks for coming today and giving your evidence. Just a question in regard to general biosecurity risks. Can you talk a little bit about the use of antibiotics in farming? And do you consider that a biosecurity risk?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Sorry. Can you repeat the question?

Ms TERPSTRA: Do you consider the use of antibiotics a biosecurity risk in farming, and can you talk a bit about the use of antibiotics in farming from your research perspective?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: We do not have any research on antimicrobial resistance. That falls more under the One Health umbrella. None of our projects touch upon it, and I do not feel in a position to comment.

Ms TERPSTRA: Okay. But you do not consider the use of antibiotics a biosecurity risk?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: I do not have an opinion on that.

Ms TERPSTRA: Okay. And one other question: are you aware of any biosecurity breaches as a result of animal activism? Just going on from Ms Bath's earlier questions—it sounded like from your earlier answer you were saying there could in fact be a range of ways that biosecurity risk could be brought onto farms. You gave an example about wild geese and ducks, for example, but are you aware of any biosecurity risks arising from animal activism?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Only the one that I heard about in the last question.

Mr MEDDICK: Just one other question, thank you, Professor. How many of the biosecurity risks, to your knowledge, that are to public health are specific to animal agriculture? Would you like to take that on notice?

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Do you mean, can I answer it later?

Mr MEDDICK: You can answer it later, but you must provide that in written form to the Committee.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Yes, I will take it on notice. Thank you.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Any other questions? If not, Professor, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for your time and contribution. You will receive a copy of the transcript for your proofreading. Thank you very much.

Assoc. Prof. ROBINSON: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.