

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 13 March 2024

MEMBERS

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David Davis – Deputy Chair

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WITNESS

Tim Ryan, General Manager, Industry Affairs, Australian Meat Industry Council.

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 or in the public gallery.

To kick off, we will get committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Ms Broad.

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

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Renee HEATH: Renee Heath, Eastern Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria Region.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Southern Metropolitan Region.

John BERGER: John Berger from Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks for coming along 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 this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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

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

Tim RYAN: My name is Timothy Ryan. I am with the Australian Meat Industry Council.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure there is plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Tim RYAN: Thank you, Chair, and thanks for having me today. I have had a cough as well, so if I pause for a cough, apologies in advance. AMIC is pleased to provide evidence and offer our unique perspectives to the committee and to highlight the work our organisation and the wider industry have done to bolster animal welfare in livestock processing facilities across Australia. Our members include businesses that process livestock for domestic and export consumption, smallgoods manufacturers, boning rooms, cold stores, wholesalers, distributors, exporters and independent local butchers. Ultimately, we represent the post farm gate supply chain.

AMIC considers the application of sound animal welfare practices to be vital to the sustainability of our industry, and our members are committed to proper, stringent and accountable animal welfare practices. Recognising the need to lift the bar and provide a pathway for commercial channels to source livestock processed under a higher standard, AMIC developed the Australian Livestock Processing Industry Animal

Welfare Certification System, which I will refer to today in its short form as AAWCS. This program has now been in use for over a decade and covers over 80 per cent of livestock processed in Australia. While AMIC is responsible for maintaining the standards of this program, it is independently managed and audited by Aus-Meat. The standards that underpin AAWCS are now in their third edition, and this week AMIC announced further changes to incorporate video surveillance as a mandatory requirement of the program from 2026. This latest update is a reflection of the program evolving to ensure it remains world leading and best practice. Video surveillance, when incorporated into quality management systems, is a technology for processors to monitor and validate animal welfare in their establishments. First and foremost, video surveillance is a tool to assist processors; it is not just a blunt regulatory instrument. I would like to thank organisations and individuals that have recognised this important step, including RSPCA Australia and our federal minister for agriculture the Honourable Murray Watt.

As made clear in the media, prior to and after the announcement of this inquiry, animal welfare and how it is portrayed stir strong emotions from both activists and the industry. Activists and welfare groups that trespass in facilities, attack industry and present unrealistic ultimatums create an environment of hostility and distrust, with little space for constructive conversation. We need to overcome this polarising approach that provides little opportunity to actually improve the welfare of animals. To that end, AMIC has been able to engage welfare groups, such as RSPCA Australia, to pragmatically look to bolster animal welfare in processing facilities. I look forward to working with RSPCA Australia as we seek to implement our policy on video surveillance in the coming months.

Animal welfare is primarily the responsibility of each state and territory. However, there are differences in how animal welfare is regulated across jurisdictions and between export and domestic processing establishments. A single, harmonised and legislated minimum animal welfare standard across all jurisdictions to bolster animal welfare outcomes at the point of slaughter has been lacking for some time, but this is not because of industry obstruction or objection. In fact it was the lack of a minimum standard that led to the development of the voluntary and now widely embraced AAWCS program.

We heard yesterday from people that want to see an end to the livestock industry. Largely we are unable to have a measured conversation with these groups as their ultimate ideology, however it is expressed, is at odds with producing food from livestock. Australians are not going to cease eating meat any time soon. With that the case, the best way to underpin animal welfare is sensible and constructive dialogue. Sensible policy solutions are critical, as the implications of getting it wrong have profound consequences on our ability to produce food. The Australian pork industry contributes over \$6 billion to the Australian economy and \$1.3 billion in Victoria. It supports approximately 35,000 jobs across Australia. It is increasingly a source of meat protein for consumers in Australia.

Approved livestock slaughter practices in Australia are based on scientific evidence. There are no current alternatives to carbon dioxide stunning in pigs which can provide on balance the most humane stunning of animals in most settings. Importantly, pigs are herd animals. CO₂ stunning allows for pigs to be handled in groups and requires the least amount of human interaction. This is critical for minimising pig stress. For these reasons CO₂ stunning remains a global best practice and the most commonly used method for stunning pigs around the world, including in Europe, the United States and Canada. The submission made by RSPCA did not call for a phase-out of CO₂ gondola systems. A recent literature review by the New South Wales DPI also agreed that it was one of the preferred methods for stunning pigs, and also this was reconfirmed by the World Organisation for Animal Health. It is not just industry saying this; we have third-party organisations also confirming this. While it is recognised that some pigs can be averse to CO₂ under certain conditions, research has demonstrated that risks can be reduced via appropriate pre-slaughter and stunning management and monitoring. If there are issues with the use of CO₂, this is where we should first prioritise any necessary corrective actions.

Commercial pig production is highly dependent on this use of CO₂ stunning. Prematurely banning this stunning technology without a viable alternative would result in the closure of some pig processing facilities in Victoria due to the sheer lack of viability and ability to compete with processors interstate and overseas. Australia's consumption of pork is growing, and while market demand for pork products remains, businesses will service that consumer. Hence a ban of CO₂ stunning of pigs in Victoria would only drive Victorian pork production to other Australian jurisdictions or overseas which permit the use of this method. This reliance on imports is what we have seen play out in the case of New Zealand.

Pork is an important and growing part of the Australian diet, being the second most consumed meat and comparable in consumption to both beef and lamb combined. Pork offers Victorian families an affordable, healthy and sustainable meal option in an environment of growing cost-of-living pressures. Banning CO₂ stunning would not be premised on the scientific consensus, would be an act of economic self-harm and would make Victoria less food secure.

Lastly, I would like to draw your attention to the three recommendations AMIC made in our submission, firstly that the committee recognise the need for a fit-for-purpose, outcomes-based minimum animal welfare standard for livestock processing. I think there was broad consensus for this recommendation. This standard would apply to processing facilities that fall outside of our voluntary best practice program. We also recommend that the committee recognise that the appropriate use of CO₂ stunning for pigs reflects the global scientific consensus, is best practice in the settings of many Australian establishments and meets regulatory requirements. And, thirdly, we recommend the committee recognise the role of the Victorian pig industry in underpinning jobs, the vibrancy of our rural communities, affordable healthy food and Victorian food security. As our organisation covers the post farm gate meat industry, I have not made comment in our submission regarding on-farm practices, and I would not consider myself an expert on the matter. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence and our unique perspectives to this committee. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for your opening remarks. I might start with this one. With the recent announcement on video surveillance in abattoirs, who will be able to review this footage, and will it ever be made publicly available?

Tim RYAN: I will answer that question in a few parts. First and foremost, what we have learned from overseas where they have trialled this type of technology – and it is widely practised already in many processing facilities in Australia – is that video surveillance is a tool for a processor to incorporate into their broader quality management system alongside food safety and alongside all the other aspects of providing a high-quality product to make sure everything is working appropriately. That is, you use it to underpin welfare in real time to make sure everything is working, and you can validate that all your systems and processes are appropriate. As part of our certification scheme, that is managed by an independent auditor, Aus-Meat, who will be verifying the use of video surveillance on plant. For export establishments where there is an OPV, or an on-plant veterinarian, they will also have access to this footage. The footage will be used to verify during an audit that what they are seeing is systematic of how that business operates. It is not appropriate for that footage to be beamed off to the public or a third party. It is to give confidence to the regulator and to allow them to do their job. We need to consider privacy in all of this. As we heard earlier, these are people's workplaces. We need to be mindful of that and give the regulator the right opportunity to do their job appropriately.

The CHAIR: How regularly will it be reviewed?

Tim RYAN: What we going to do next is establish an expert committee – we have done this process through the last three revisions of the standard – and that will include RSPCA Australia; we have asked them to participate. We will also have independent animal welfare experts as well as the regulator as part of that process. We are yet to get into specifics – and I do not want to draft the standard on the fly in the hearing – but we are going to work through those specific details in the coming months and look to have everything finalised this year. So that gives businesses a 12-month window to invest in whatever changes are required to meet this new standard.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In response to ABC's 7.30 program on the use of CO₂ gassing for pigs, which showed them screaming, gasping for air, violently thrashing, trying to escape, some of them with limbs caught in the gondola, your CEO said he did not see any mistreatment of any animals during that process, which included footage gathered over 13 days at three separate abattoirs in Victoria. Yet in your submission to this inquiry you state that CO₂ gassing is aversive and stressful and that it could be improved. Can you please reconcile these two positions?

Tim RYAN: We are not hiding the fact that CO₂ in some instances can be aversive, but on balance – and it depends on the establishments and the types of pigs that you are processing – in many contexts we see CO₂ as the most appropriate method for stunning pigs. I mentioned in my opening remarks CO₂ allows for pigs to remain as a group and maintain their social connections, but it also avoids the need to individually restrain an animal and cause it additional stress as well. So on balance we see it as appropriate. But pigs can be aversive at

times. We believe, particularly with our standard, that certain checks and balances in place can limit that risk, but ultimately it is a risk that we cannot eliminate 100 per cent.

The CHAIR: Social connections into a gas chamber is certainly an interesting perspective, for me at least. I am keen to hear how you say it could be improved. I am keen to hear how – gassing.

Tim RYAN: How the CO₂ system can be improved?

The CHAIR: Yes. In your submission you say that it could be improved.

Tim RYAN: Yes. The footage that was aired on 7.30 about a year ago now is not indicative of the processing via CO₂ of pigs in Australia. When I have gone into those facilities and seen them or when I have spoken to industry colleagues, that is not the type of practice that they see firsthand.

The CHAIR: It was 13 days of footage across three abattoirs. I feel it would be incorrect to say that that was not consistent with how it takes place.

Tim RYAN: People are basing this assessment on footage that has been illegally captured. We cannot verify the accuracy of it, how much is legitimate and if there are any issues around how the footage has been treated or manipulated along the way. There are segments in that process. It is not all pigs that are demonstrating an aversive reaction, it is some pigs, so you cannot say it is systematic. There are instances though where we can improve things. Particularly if you are accredited under our standard, there are checks and balances in place, particularly in that lead-up to slaughter. The research indicates that is the most important period to ensuring that a pig does not have an aversive reaction once it goes into the CO₂ stunning process.

The CHAIR: 7.30 is a very reputable program. I am sure they would have verified that footage.

Bev McARTHUR: Very reputable.

The CHAIR: Yes, it sure is, Bev.

Bev McARTHUR: The ABC are extremely reputable – give us a break.

The CHAIR: Order! Just quickly, there are places around the world that do not use CO₂. New Zealand does not. What are your thoughts on the way that they stun pigs?

Tim RYAN: I think when we look at how we operate in Australia, we look at what is going on around the world and consider what other countries are doing, but we need to apply it in the Australian context. Many countries use CO₂; it is very mainstream. A point we made in our submission, which I think is worth noting, is that New Zealand went down a pathway of – I am not sure of the mechanism, whether it was commercially or regulatory – phasing out or not using CO₂. The evidence or the data – if you look at how much they consume, they consume a comparable amount to Australia. But as they have increasingly increased their consumption, their local industry is not large enough or competitive enough to actually produce pork in a way that can meet the price point that the New Zealand consumer wants, so they increasingly import the vast majority of their pork, and they are importing it from countries that use this technology. They import it from Europe, and they import some from Australia. So a ban of a certain practice does not actually address it, particularly if it is not based on science. We have got to comply with our trade obligations with our trading partners. It simply just moves from one production to another and does not actually change anything for pigs.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is well and truly my time, so we will head to Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much for coming today and for the submission. Can you talk a little bit more about your role, because you cover the whole meat industry, and what direct contact you have as far as the pig industry goes and working with stakeholders to ensure that we enhance those standards in animal welfare.

Tim RYAN: Yes. Our membership, and we make it clear in the submission, actually does not have a pig-processing member in Victoria. There are a few here, but we do not actually have them in our membership. But we do include a large number of pig processors interstate, as well as other processors of different species in Victoria. We also have many smallgoods manufacturers in our membership as well as a lot of small business

independent local butchers. In this forum and elsewhere we represent those businesses. In particular you mentioned, I suppose, the process to establish standards. We have been actively involved in the process alongside Animals Australia, RSPCA, the Australian Veterinary Association and other consumer and community groups to work through that minimum standard that we have been calling for for a long time. It has been very slow. Everyone I suppose has got frustrations with the process, and that is just the matter of working with the Commonwealth and many state jurisdictions. But across all those forums we work on behalf of our members.

Gaelle BROAD: I guess we heard people with different views yesterday about independence, but how important is it for industry to be engaged in those conversations?

Tim RYAN: It is a good question, and I think the image yesterday that was portrayed was one that somehow the agricultural sector has captured government and we have got the agenda. I think if you spoke to a farmer, they would feel the exact opposite, where they feel like the agenda is being set by these welfare groups. We are at the table and they are as well, and we try and work through these matters as part of a democratic process. The insinuation that we have somehow captured government or captured the agenda I think is false, particularly if you look at their access to all these forums, particularly if you look at the level of funding some of these organisations have behind them as well. The *Weekly Times* had an article a couple of weeks ago about Animals Australia's \$80 million war chest to fund campaigns over the last five years. If you spoke to any farming organisation, that type of money is just simply way out of reach. So they have got access and they have got finance to push their messaging. I think if they are not resonating, I do not think it is an issue with the table being out of balance, I think it is an issue with the messaging.

Gaelle BROAD: Now, if you could talk to – I guess we got the impression yesterday it seemed to be like there are almost no rules for the industry, that sort of inference. Can you talk a bit about the regulations that do exist and the role of PrimeSafe and the enforcement options available.

Tim RYAN: I will do my best to do it justice, but we have gone through a lot of this in the submission as well. I will try and explain it as quickly as I can. Across all livestock processing establishments in Australia, we have the underlying standard AS 4696, whether you are domestic or export. Regardless of what state, that is the minimum. That is the standard. It was designed around food safety to make sure that we produce a wholesome product, but tied to that as part of the wholesome product are the animal welfare credentials as well. Across the board we have that standard, and it does pick up animal welfare. On top of that we have got our industry best-practice standard that covers about 80 per cent or more – depending on the species – of livestock processed in Australia, and that is independently managed by Aus-Meat, and for export establishments that is recognised by the federal government as meeting the requirements on animal welfare for their export accreditation. So there is that recognition with the federal government there, although it is managed and audited by Aus-Meat. Those export establishments also have an on-plant veterinarian that does the daily checks on animal welfare as well and makes sure that that plant is operating in line with their obligations to be able to export.

Within all this I suppose the one piece there – and we have made a recommendation and have actually been trying to engage government and stakeholders – is this minimum standard. So we have got AS 4696, which is designed for food safety but it covers animal welfare; we have got our best-practice program that covers 80 per cent; but there is this 20 per cent that is only really regulated from a technical perspective via food safety with an animal welfare standard attached to it. So we have been engaging in the process to write a minimum standard to cover the plants that do not fall under our best-practice program. We have been at the table. We were there a decade ago and it did not get across the line at the end, so we were very disappointed with that outcome. That was the ultimate impetus that led us to basically self-regulate and to have that level of independence in the process, because we see the need for this. Consumers want to be assured that what they are buying has been processed under a high level of animal welfare credentials. I think the standard does a good job of that. This latest initiative to add CCTV or video surveillance to it as well will further bolster that standard.

Gaelle BROAD: Were there any comments made yesterday in what you have seen that you would like to speak to, perhaps a different perspective? Because I guess we had certain perspectives expressed yesterday – is there anything that you particularly want to comment on?

Tim RYAN: I think the witnesses yesterday are free to have their views, but a number of them did make it clear that although what they are pushing for at the moment is a short-term goal, their ultimate goal is to end

livestock production. I think that was made by several, so it is important to note that underlying all their messaging, that is their ultimate goal and that is what they are seeking. We just need to be transparent about that. With some of the footage that was shown yesterday and broadly in media that preceded this inquiry being announced, our members do not view that – and I do not view that – as common practice. It is difficult to verify because we do not know the accuracy of the footage, but we do push back on that being representative of what we stand for. We are hoping that this initiative to incorporate CCTV or video surveillance into what will be 80 per cent of the livestock processed in this country will add further integrity and comfort to consumers that when they go out and buy meat, they can rest assured that it was processed to a high standard of animal welfare.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Just one question: do you consider that the current *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* adequately addresses concerns that the general public might have with pig husbandry and slaughter, and if not, do you feel the new proposed Act will serve this purpose?

Tim RYAN: Thanks for the question. I am not probably an appropriate person to mention animal husbandry with respect to pigs, but I will discuss the slaughter aspect of your question, if that is okay.

John BERGER: Yes, that is okay. I think in some respects they go hand in hand in terms of what the outcomes are.

The CHAIR: I would agree.

John BERGER: So that is why I put both of them in there.

Tim RYAN: The current POCTA Act does have an exemption in the Act for animal slaughter. The POCTA Act is designed to protect and sustain animal life. If we are part of a process that produces food but as part of the process to produce food we would end the life respectfully and humanely of an animal, it is to some degree diametrically opposed to the POCTA Act. They cannot coexist necessarily. So there is an exemption, and animal welfare is then covered under the *Meat Industry Act*, which can sit far more harmoniously alongside all the food safety aspects of regulation.

We have reviewed the new draft Bill on animal welfare. We are looking at it. We will do a submission. We do note that that exemption is now removed and that it is trying to be harmonised or brought in under the one Act. I think in terms of the implications for that, a lot of it is going to be borne out once the regulations are written. I think key to that will be this development of a minimum standard. That is the missing piece of the puzzle when it comes to regulating livestock slaughter. We have got AS 4696, which does a good job, but to capture all elements of a livestock-processing facility, we need a more holistic, more encompassing standard.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Berger. Is that all your questions?

John BERGER: Yes, it is.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. Always keeping us to time. We will go to Mrs McArthur, who I am sure will use her full time.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. I just want you to reiterate a comment you made before: that no amount of changing regulations or extra procedures would satisfy activists in terms of animal welfare, because their agenda is to close down the pork industry and every other meat- and fibre-producing industry using animals. Would you agree?

Tim RYAN: It is a broad church of welfare groups, so I will not cast them all with the same brush, but I think for many of the ones yesterday that is something I would agree with. There are constructive groups, though, and we cannot just work in isolation as an industry. We do need to work with groups that are willing to listen and see the legitimate right of the industry to exist, and we can engage with those. Organisations like RSPCA Australia I think have a higher degree of community trust and recognition. They are also accepting of our existence, and we can work with them to pragmatically and sensibly address animal welfare issues. We can

have a conversation where we can be honest with them as opposed to, I suppose, the approach of putting in place ultimatums or threats on an industry that are never going to lead to anything constructive.

Bev McARTHUR: Should there be a national standard for all of these activities, instead of just state-based random ones?

Tim RYAN: It is challenging. Definitely we need a national standard, and we want that harmonised across the states and territories, particularly for our businesses that operate in multiple jurisdictions. If you are trying to comply with different rules in different places, it is becoming very challenging. But in the efforts to harmonise, there is always divergence in these things. I have noticed that the federal government is about to announce the new animal welfare strategy. That is an opportunity to get everyone in the room to try and harmonise how we manage animal welfare regulation across Australia. A core element of how much regulation is conducted is this process of setting standards and those standards being adopted by each state or territory jurisdiction. We have had frustrations with that. Many standards are out of date, hence why we have self-regulated. I think the other side also sees frustration. I think any opportunities to improve that process and improve the ability to make it more efficient and more dynamic would be positive. But we are also mindful that we find it hard to engage with the likes of those who we heard from yesterday, because ultimately they see that process as a means to see an end to our industry, so it is challenging for us.

Bev McARTHUR: This idea that the general populace should see the CCTV footage that you are going to put in place is surely a workplace issue, really. I cannot see the CCTV footage that might have been involved in – I have just had a knee operation; should I expect to be able to see what the surgeon does in a theatre or in any other workplace? So why should we even entertain the idea that CCTV footage obtained for practical purposes in a workplace should be available to the general public?

Tim RYAN: I do not think the general public want to see it. They understand that an animal has to be processed. They want to be assured that it is done humanely and respectfully. They want to know that the regulator has sufficient oversight, but they do not want to see the process necessarily. That is what we hear from consumer research. I think the groups that do want to see it are the ones that we heard from yesterday. We need to strike the right balance in how we can assure consumers in the community that we are doing enough, that we are meeting all our regulatory responsibilities and that the regulator has oversight. But at the same time we need to respect the workplace, and these are people's lives; they come to work every day, and we need to respect their privacy.

Bev McARTHUR: If 96 per cent of the population want to eat pork, why should 4 per cent, or even a minority of that, suggest that they should not be able to?

Tim RYAN: I respect the views of vegans to be a vegan. I think they need to reciprocate and respect the views of meat eaters to eat meat. We are happy to have these debates, but strongarming consumers into what they choose to eat is not the appropriate way. I think everyone wants choice, and we are happy to participate in the debate of choices.

Bev McARTHUR: Just like we have shut down the hardwood timber industry in Australia and wrecked jobs exponentially, if this industry was to close down and we imported pork products like we are importing timber products at the moment, how would the consumer be guaranteed that the pork they are eating that is imported has been processed in a humane way?

Tim RYAN: Considering the example of pork, I think it would be highly likely, given that consumers want to eat pork, that if a country could meet our own biosecurity and food safety requirements, they would be able to bring in pork for human consumption. The difference, I suppose, clarifying that, is pork imported into Australia is for smallgoods manufacturing. There are caveats about what it can be used for. But ultimately, at the end of the day, consumers are not going to change their behaviour. So if we ban an industry or ban a practice, I think we would ultimately see that production moved elsewhere and that consumption maintained. I think it would be highly problematic if we tried to impose a trade restriction on imported product on the grounds of animal welfare, specifically on CO₂, given that most of our trading partners would disagree with that interpretation of the science, and then we would be in breach of our trade obligations. It is fraught to think that we can just simply close an industry.

Bev McARTHUR: Close down the industry here and import it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mrs McArthur. We will go to Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for being here today. Just quickly in relation to CCTV and the announcements that have been made, you are still working through the detail, I heard you say, but you are firm that you are not offering to provide that really to regulators; it is for industry to look at rather than regulators.

Tim RYAN: I may have missed that, Katherine. Could you repeat it, sorry? It was a bit disrupted.

Katherine COPSEY: Apologies if my internet is not very good. I will put my camera off, and hopefully that will help. Just quickly on CCTV, you said you are working through the details of that. But as I understand it, you are not offering to make that footage available to regulators. The industry will review that footage itself. Is that correct?

Tim RYAN: No. It is not correct, sorry. It is true that we are going to work through a process. There is a lot to unpack when we look at implementing this type of change, so we will take it through an expert review process to bring in the right people, bring in the right input from industry, but also, critically, welfare groups and regulators to make sure what we design is fit for purpose. In terms of a high level and what we can explain now with our intent of this announcement, for those plants certified under this program it would be available for the regulator, or in the case where it is part of an Aus-Meat audit, they would also be looking at this. So it would be available to those two bodies, but it would not be going beyond that to a public viewing or another body external to the company.

One point to clarify as well: CCTV is commonly used in many establishments already. It is nothing new. Many have had it in their place for over a decade. A key concern, I suppose, prior to us making this announcement has been around the security of footage and our ability to protect the staff and also the business. Many of those establishments that use CCTV do so in an isolated network. They are not tapped into the internet, so they are not at risk of being hacked – and we have seen incidences of meat companies being hacked in recent years. So the ability to maintain an offline system, all stored, is an option that we want to keep open, but that footage can be verified and viewed by the regulator or anyone during the audit. This is also common practice already with many commercial requirements – supermarkets or major buyers of our product globally apply similar practices in terms of how they do their own checks on the facility.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you for clarifying. Turning now to gassing, I want to understand how long it commonly takes. When you are looking at gassing and assessing it as a humane slaughter option, you speak of ‘aversive reactions’. Quickly, what is an ‘averse reaction’ in plain English, and how long does it take for a gondola to descend to the point that the gas makes pigs unconscious?

Tim RYAN: Given I am not a veterinarian or an expert in animal welfare, I think there is a limit to my, I suppose, expert opinion. I was trained as an economist, I work in the meat industry, but I do not claim to be any expert on this. I would refer this to the scientists. The latter part of that question around the timing, as I understand it is 20 to 30 seconds, possibly longer, but in terms of that period to insensibility it does depend on the technology and the infrastructure in that plant and how it is actually applied. There would be variation plant by plant. But the process to go full cycle and put the pigs into that stunning gondola may take I think a couple of minutes, but I am happy to be corrected on that matter. As for I suppose what I consider an adverse reaction

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Katherine COPSEY: ‘Aversive’ – the term you keep using is ‘aversive’. What does that mean?

Tim RYAN: Some of the footage that has been shown I think is hard to verify, but what I am seeing I would consider an adverse reaction. That is not what we want when we stun pigs. However, that is not what I see if I go and visit a pig abattoir or what I hear when I speak to pig processors. That is not the type of business-as-usual stunning process that we have come to expect.

Katherine COPSEY: And just to understand, I saw in your submission you do not currently have a Victorian piggery amongst your membership – true?

Tim RYAN: True. We have many Victorian businesses, but they are other parts of the supply chain or processors of other species of livestock.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. I am just trying to drill down to understand this industry [Zoom dropout] CO₂ gassing. I am trying to understand what proportion of that process the industry is considering as them measuring the adverse reaction. So is it at the moment that the pigs are in the 85 to 90 per cent oxygen-free environment where they will fall unconscious? At what point does pre-slaughter become slaughter in that analysis?

The CHAIR: Could I just very briefly interrupt, Ms Copsey. You are not in the room. That is your time, but I will allow the question just because you had connection issues at the start, if everyone is fine with that.

Katherine COPSEY: I appreciate that, Chair.

Tim RYAN: In terms of what we measure, I will talk at least from our industry or AAWCS standard, which does cover a large amount of the pigs processed in Australia. There are checks and balances in place currently to, I suppose, measure performance if the system is working appropriately. A key indicator or more predictor of whether the system via CO₂ stunning is going to function as it is intended is that animal handling prior to the stun. We know that if animals are calmly handled and managed through a system and remains as part of a group, there is a far better chance of a successful process. So our standard looks for vocalisation, making sure that the pigs are not expressing any signals that may indicate stress prior to going into the gondola system, and then also critically post gondola system a key performance measure is whether all those animals have successfully been made insensible and are ready and appropriate for humane slaughter.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks, Ms Copsey. We will end with Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. Thank you so much for your presentation and your submission. My questions I guess are mainly practical and logistical. First of all, and I know you are overarching the meat industry, how many meat meals would Australians consume per year?

Tim RYAN: It might be hard to do my arithmetic on the fly on that one. I suppose looking at who our consumers are and how regularly they do eat meat, survey data indicates the level of non-meat eaters is less than 5 per cent. So by and large we regularly provide a meal to the vast majority of Australians.

Renee HEATH: Every day, and maybe more than one meal per day.

Tim RYAN: Every day.

Renee HEATH: The reason I ask that is do you think that there would even be a replacement industry available – for instance, tofu or something like that – that could provide that many meals if we were to phase out an industry?

Tim RYAN: There are probably two aspects to that question. One is how consumers behave and also what our environment and our production systems are capable of producing. If you look at the consumer side, and we heard from a producer of cell-based meat yesterday, we are happy to compete over that consumer. Our main consumers want choice. We are happy to respect that. I do not think consumers will want to eat plant-based dumplings seven days a week. I think they want variety in that choice and to be able to choose different meats and choose different ways of cooking that meat to suit their preferences. So I cannot see that changing and that being, I suppose, a replacement or meat being replaced by something else. I think people want to have meat.

The other key part of why we produce food is because we have got the natural resources to do so. If you are looking at the grains we are producing or the livestock we are running, they are suitable for that context and that environment and the synergies of other industries that might produce by-products or feed for those livestock sectors. If we are looking at livestock more broadly, phasing out or banning a particular livestock, you might not necessarily be able to grow a crop where those animals were or replace the feed with something for human consumption. It is far more complicated than that. So we need to get that balance right about what we are good at and what we are good at producing and then I think keeping it a free market and giving consumers choice, and we are happy to demonstrate our credentials. I think given that 95 per cent of consumers eat meat we are doing an okay job.

Renee HEATH: Thank you for that. I do not want to ask you a question that is completely unreasonable, but would your organisation be able to maybe figure out how many meat meals Australians have?

Tim RYAN: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Because I think it would be good to look at from a logistics point of view. Given that pig products rank as the second most consumed protein source in Victoria, what would be the financial impact on consumers if animal welfare activists got their way and shut down the industry?

Tim RYAN: It depends on the broader context of any type of ban. Let us just hypothetically say we phased out or overnight removed pigs from Victoria. I think it would create a dependency on other states to produce pork and bring that into Australia. That would increase the cost. If that was prevented in any way and suddenly you had no choice at all, I think there would be the consumer cost and consumer choice element but also our vulnerability to relying on really extended food chains. COVID-19 was a really good example of when a big shock happens and supply chains cannot handle it. If those supply chains are stretched to other states – and often they are – when things work well, it is good. But the more food miles you add to a supply chain, the more the risk of disruption along that process. Likewise, if we banned it across Australia and imported all our pork and we hit another global pandemic, suddenly you do not have any meat at all.

Renee HEATH: Okay. Thank you. Yesterday we heard from several groups expressing the view that consuming pork is no longer in line with prevailing social values. Considering around 95 or 96 per cent of people still have meat in their diet, would you address this or refute that statement?

Tim RYAN: Yes. I think consumers want to know that the meat they consume has been processed in a way that is humane and respects the animal; that is part of the process to produce food. I think we can provide those assurances, particularly with our latest announcement on CCTV that will further add that certainty and I suppose quell some of the noise coming from these more radical groups. But I think the hard data speaks for itself, given that people and Australians and Victorians eat meat regularly. Pork for instance is a growing protein, and in this context I do not think consumers are walking away at all.

Renee HEATH: Yes. So you would say it is growing, not going the other way, like we heard?

Tim RYAN: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much. Those are my questions.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Dr Heath. We have ended with probably not enough time to go around to each member again, so are you happy to receive questions on notice?

Tim RYAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: I would be particularly interested in that research that you have spoken around, about consumer behaviour as well, if you can provide that. Any others will be sent through the committee staff.

Thank you very much for coming along today and making a submission and taking the time to appear. That concludes the hearing.

Witness withdrew.