

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 13 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

Emma Germano, President,

Charles Everist, General Manager, and

Brendan Tatham, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Farmers Federation.

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 paying 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 today.

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

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

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria.

Renee HEATH: Renee Heath, Eastern Victoria.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

John BERGER: And John Berger, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming and appearing before us 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 the hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

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

Emma GERMANO: Emma Germano, Victorian Farmers Federation.

Brendan TATHAM: Brendan Tatham, Victorian Farmers Federation.

Charles EVERIST: Charles Everist, Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. I know you are all very familiar with appearing before these inquiries. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they are kept to around 10 minutes to ensure that we have plenty of time for questions and discussion.

Emma GERMANO: Thank you very much, committee. I must say it is with dismay that I am appearing at the hearing today. On the circumstances which have precipitated the inquiry, generally as an industry we say that we do not like to comment on illegally obtained footage or trespass – footage that has been obtained by trespass. We say that we do not like to engage in creating transparency for our industry in that manner, and yet that is the very basis as to why this inquiry has come about.

It has become a spectacle in fact, and whilst conversations about how we ethically produce food – any sort of food – could not be more central to the running of a society and what it means to partake in a society, what I have witnessed over the last few days and media leading into the inquiry or that was produced seemingly in order to precede the inquiry has sought to vilify an entire industry, not just the pig industry or the pork producing industry but all farmers. This inquiry and the discussions that we are actually having, the conversation is really rooted in ideology. And that is a meaningful conversation to have, but to have this conversation in a manner that is hostile or adversarial is actually not helpful to the fact that what we are talking about is the very food that people eat, one of the core needs of our society and for human beings. The ideology or the ideological perspective is really what is driving this conversation, and we accept that people have different ideology and that we come together as a community to discuss what we think reflects our society in regard to how we want food produced – and farmers welcome that conversation all of the time. We welcome that conversation because it is central to ensuring that we have the tools necessary and available to us to actually produce food for people to eat.

We are almost coming at this whole topic from the perspective that animals are human, and animals are not human, but humans are in fact animals. We are part of a food chain and we partake in that food chain, but we had the conversation outside and I think it is really important to note that killer whales do not feel guilty when they eat seals and lions do not feel guilty when they eat zebras, and they do not have the capacity to contemplate the way that they interact with the animals that they are eating in the way that we do, and therefore we should do that with brevity and with deep respect for the fact that we have these animals to care for and that we in fact eat them. Some of the comments that were made through other people's submissions or through some of the hearings yesterday essentially pose the notion that if you choose to eat meat somehow you are not making a conscious choice or that you could not possibly be making a conscious choice if you choose to eat meat. It was also posed that farmers must have a deep sense of guilt in regard to the way that we raise food, knowing what the ultimate end of our animals is. As a farmer I found that deeply offensive.

There have been questions posed to farmers and to an entire industry, regarding footage that was aired on Monday evening, that farmers should sit here and have to say that they condemn the behaviour that was part of the footage on Monday evening. I think that that is a grossly unfair question to have posed to any person that came in here to contribute to the hearing.

When we talk about ideology and how we are using an ideological basis to set up our food system and to make conscious decisions around the ethics of our food supply chain, the word 'dominion' has been thrown around. In fact there was a submission yesterday where we are talking about the dominion movement, and I hope the committee will indulge me for just a second in regard to where the word 'dominion' actually originates from or the notion that we interact with the planet that we live on or the way that we eat our food or the way that we produce our animal products for consumption. 'Dominion' is a notion that is posed in the Bible in the second creation story in Genesis. Dominion is put into that story that God gave humans dominion over the earth and over the animals. If you take dominion to be power, you are projecting an image of God, I suppose, that seeks to be cruel to the earth and to nature and to the animals and to the plants, where in fact dominion is supposed to be about stewardship and caretaking of the planet that we are living on and the animals that we are consuming as part of our survival.

When we are talking about ideology, all people will have different bases for their ideology. What we can very quickly fall into is being hypocrites, because it does not matter what it is that you choose to eat; it has an impact on this environment, it has an impact on the planet. So we have individuals starting to dictate their ideology to the rest of society, to the rest of the community, and that is really the basis of what this inquiry is about. There are standards and guidelines, there are laws in place, there are frameworks that are in place. It has been light on in regard to recommendations around how to improve the framework and pretty heavy on ideology around the production of food and the consumption of food that involves animals.

We can all have our own personal judgements. I see some of the people that have presented to you own cats. Some people would say that locking a cat inside is so that they do not harm wild animals or go out on the streets and to keep them safe. Some other people might say that that is actually stopping a cat from displaying its natural tendencies. If there are people who feed their cats vegan diets, as a farmer I would suggest that that is not feeding a cat an appropriate diet. That is my judgement, though.

Some people say that we should not use animal products to clothe ourselves. However, those people who do not use animal products to clothe themselves are often wearing products that are created from the petrochemical industry that creates microplastics that end up in the ocean, because we wash our clothes, and those microplastics essentially affect the carbon sink. That is what phytoplankton actually does for the environment. It is the largest carbon sink that we have, and it accounts for about 40 per cent of carbon sequestration around the globe. So anything that we do has implications to the globe that we are living on, and therefore having conversations meaningfully about how to be feeding ourselves and clothing ourselves sustainably is very important. But we just have to be very careful that we do not find ourselves being hypocritical. As I said, every single food choice has consequences.

There are some statistics that have been posed in regard to the number of vegans that exist in Australia and this imposition that for the food production industry, particularly the pork industry in this case but across all animal industries, the community do not trust us and we have lost the trust of the community. Research absolutely demonstrates that that is not the case and that 74 per cent of people that were interviewed as part of an independent piece of research that was done do absolutely trust farmers. In fact we were up there with the same level of trust that the community has in the science and engineering fields and industries. Of the people who are vegan, which research suggests is anywhere between 1 and 2 per cent in Australia, some 35 per cent say that the reason they choose veganism is because of animal welfare concerns. My maths says that we are talking about a particular ideology that represents somewhere between 0.35 per cent of the population and 0.7 per cent of the population, so we would need to be very careful that there is not a kneejerk reaction here as presenting an industry that has lost trust. People are still consuming animal products, and they do so trusting in Australian farmers, the systems that we use and the very principle that we care about our animals, because if we do not care about our animals then we do not have a business.

There is an existing framework. I think what has been very clear is that the multiple pieces of legislation, the different states that we have in the country and the different ways that we go about reviewing those standards and guidelines or codes do create some confusion, and that is something that I think is within the remit of the committee to actually look at. But we have already made commitments that we are currently reviewing the standards and guidelines for pigs. We know that there is draft animal welfare legislation that is going before Parliament this year, so we have a very clear demonstration that you have an industry that is more than willing to partake in the setting of the standards by which we operate. People who have appeared before you have criticised Agriculture Victoria, they have criticised the regulator and they have criticised the very laws that we are all actually abiding by. We are talking about a subset of the community who actually want to be the police and want to be the watchdog. It is not appropriate for any group in the community who espouse a very particular ideology to see themselves as being the police of an industry.

Finally, the most important thing that we should be considering is the food security aspects or the implications to food security from any findings that this committee might put forward or any recommendations this committee might put forward. Whilst people have come in here and said that animal agriculture should be phased out within two years immediately, rewilding of land, all sorts of suggestions, no-one has posed a solution as to the economic implication of tinkering with our food security or our food supply and an economic analysis of what would happen to regional communities, employment and so forth. But there are implications for people who right now are struggling to put food on the table for their family to eat. One in three people have changed the way that they purchase food at the supermarket because they cannot afford to eat the way they did before, and we know that one in six children in Australia go to bed hungry in this country.

To have a conversation that has become, as I said, a spectacle without any regard to the impact that that would have on the community, some of the notions that are being put forward, is frankly quite disturbing, and it actually highlights the fact that there are a bunch of rich people sitting around dictating what happens to people who perhaps cannot afford to make the food choices that they need to make to feed their family. When I say 'rich people' I mean people who have not had the unfortunate experience of being concerned as to whether they have enough money in their bank account to feed their children before they go to bed. So we have to be very, very mindful that the rich can afford their ideology but there are implications to the rest of the society that we live in when we make decisions based on ideology which I have argued is of a very small subset of the community right now.

Brendan TATHAM: Perhaps just a couple of comments to help the committee – I imagine the committee is thinking about how they can practically help Parliament with a report and some recommendations to allow

Parliament to deal with really the contrast between what is a broader community argument and what is an ideological argument. I think you have probably already seen that farmers care for their animals and that animal welfare is important to farmers, and you will have heard that many, many times. You may or may not have heard that being able to feed our population of 6 million people actually requires an expensive, complex supply chain and production system, and so the ability to be able to feed our people, just the practicalities of feeding our people, actually requires a degree of intensification of agriculture.

Then following on from that theme, our community is actually made up of a whole range of cultures and beliefs/systems, and we have to respect that. I think the element that there are animal agriculture and animal food products that are the central cultural aspect of a whole range of different communities – it is okay to have a belief that there are animal rights and those sorts of aspects, but also there are beliefs that other communities have with regard to what is an appropriate food source for them. I think the key element to that is that everyone has a role and everyone gets the opportunity to have a say, but that has to be within the law. That has to be within the systems which government sets up and the laws which are set up for people to be able to operate in this society. Going outside that is really not appropriate, and I think that is a really important principle that this committee would want to be able to convey to Parliament.

The other element is really around the systems that we use, and they are complex, because, by necessity, to be able to feed all of our people we have complex systems. And they have always needed work. They will continue to need work. Since we started agriculture about 10,000 years ago we have been able to improve agriculture, improve our systems and improve the way we do things. That is always going to be the case, and I think if there is a recommendation that this committee needs to make to government, it is really around ensuring that government invests appropriately in developing the systems which we use to produce our food, and that involves all groups across society to be able to be involved in those discussions and participate in them appropriately. But at the end of the day it is government that makes the decisions about where the legislation sits and where the standard sits, but that does need to involve all parties equally. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Is that all?

Charles EVERIST: I do not think I can add any more justice to those comments.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. We will start questions with Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Emma, for a very strident defence of agriculture. You have addressed the elephant in the room here, which is the spectacle that is occurring. I do not know when that footage was obtained or how long ago before it was given to the ABC and used conveniently the night before this inquiry. I walked out of this hearing because I would not condone the use of that material, which is subject to criminal action at the moment in the courts. I think it was highly inappropriate that we publicly aired that material when it is subject to criminal action. I think what has happened here is an egregious abuse of parliamentary privilege, quite frankly.

You are quite right – a very small proportion of the population, very small, are trying to impose a view on the rest of society which is unjustified. No matter what changes we made in agriculture on the parameters of welfare for animals would suffice, because the endgame is to eliminate the use of animals for meat and fibre production. That is the agenda here. That is the agenda that has always been in this scenario. As you know, I have been on other inquiries in this space, and there is no amount of changes to regulations that will satisfy the agenda of these zealots.

I do not know what we can recommend apart from – I suggested perhaps a national code that might help so that producers across Australia have the one set of rules to comply with. That might be a good thing. It should be the case in so many areas of government legislation. Also when people embark on criminal activity, they should properly and summarily be dealt with. I do not know whether there are any other recommendations you would want to make or advise us on how we can ensure that government protects the agricultural industry and helps it to flourish.

Emma GERMANO: I think what you have picked up on there is part of the dismay because you want to come at a conversation respectfully and respect everybody's opinions about it. I do understand that there is an argument that says, 'Well, if we weren't here trespassing, no-one would know.' I think that it is prevalent upon the food production industry to demonstrate that transparency. Many people would say that the food industry

has gone a long way to try to demonstrate that transparency. But I was particularly concerned when I heard yesterday that even with mandatory CCTV footage, if it was put in place, ‘Well, we probably won’t stop trespassing or we’ll go elsewhere,’ and that it will continue to progress.

I am also concerned really particularly about the notion of this group of people wanting to be the watchdog, because it undermines the faith in the whole food sector when we have the spectacle that we are seeing at the moment. Having trust in the food sector for any person in Australia I think is really important to mental health and wellbeing. It talks about your security, about living in a society. You want to feel like you are going to have access to clean, green, ethical food and that you do not have to feel guilty about the choices that you are making to feed your family. I think that the existing framework can be somewhat convoluted. When I say ‘somewhat convoluted’ – I mean, there have been suggestions that you are allowed to be cruel to an animal, that there are exemptions to be cruel to an animal. There are no exemptions to be cruel to an animal. What we have is a list of standards and guidelines or codes across different species that have been developed with stakeholders relying upon scientific evidence, relying on expertise and relying on a practical understanding as to how the industry has to operate. That will always be in the context of consumers being able to afford the food that we produce. Those existing frameworks are currently under review, so to suggest that no-one cares about it or that there is a way to get out of the framework or that there is an exemption is misleading at best.

Bev McARTHUR: Emma or Charles or Brendan, can you give us any evidence of, where trespassing has occurred, how it has affected those individuals on their farms, or their workers or their animals?

Emma GERMANO: The vice-president of the Victorian Farmers Federation is sitting in the gallery, and so I hope I do her family justice when I share the story that when they had animal activists invade their property, it ended up being her father and her uncle who were put in the back of the divvy van and that that was of grave offence to them. Danyel has chosen not to live on the family farming property with her children because she wants to be able to keep her children safe. So there is mental anguish – and also from the perspective, believe it or not, of keeping the trespassers safe as well. We cannot have people just turning up on a property where there is plant equipment that can damage them and there are animals that can be harmed – the mental anguish, again, of the farmers who are wondering whether or not there is going to be someone in their shed and whether or not that is going to lead to a violent confrontation. It would be a real shame for the current circumstances around this trespass to lead to an event where either a violent confrontation happens or someone is hurt or killed because of the trespass.

Bev McARTHUR: Are the police being active enough in this space when you report them?

The CHAIR: That was your final question, but I will allow it.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you.

Emma GERMANO: As we know, there are many disadvantages, sadly – there are many advantages but there are many disadvantages – of living out in rural and regional Victoria. So sometimes you could call the police but have no sense of when police will be there to protect you or your family and essentially manage people who are breaking the law.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you.

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

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for your submission as well and for coming today. I note in your submission you do say:

All pig farming in Australia, particularly in Victoria, is highly regulated, with farmers adhering to stringent welfare requirements. The legislation in place is adequate and sufficient, ensuring that these high standards are consistently met.

You have certainly raised some of the challenges of this inquiry. Emma, you mentioned the need to focus on how to improve the framework, but given your statement there, I guess, what do you think the committee could recommend, or should, to improve it further?

Brendan TATHAM: I think the approach to which standards and guidelines are developed can be slow, and that is because the way that the Australian system works is they are looking for consensus across all different

groups, and that is a challenge. I think there is an opportunity to really enhance the governance of how the standards and guidelines are produced by really being able to develop, I think – and it is a bit out there – a series of committees which can be educated about the practices, about the science and about the community expectations so that there are groups that are educated and being able to provide comment into the system in addition to the current approach, which opens for general comment from the community. I think the clear lack, from my perspective, is an understanding about what is science, what is proven beyond a reasonable doubt from the scientific peer review process and what is opinion, and that is a real shame, because unfortunately at the moment the opinion component seems to be overwhelming what is the science component, and it is actually the science and technology which we have used over eons to be able to improve agriculture and agricultural systems. That is the bit that we need to be focusing on into the future.

Emma GERMANO: I would also just add to that that I think because it takes quite the effort to get your mind around the framework, that creates an issue around understanding and transparency of the framework itself. I mean, one of the anomalies as we have been working through not only our submission here but our submission into the draft legislation for animal welfare is understanding that framework and the fact that the pig standards and guidelines are actually sitting in the *Livestock Management Act* rather than in the POCTA Act. So there is a very small example of how that sets it apart from the other species, and that inconsistency I think does lead to confusion.

It is really important that everybody has faith in that system – animal activists, farmers, scientists, veterinarians and the community – so we have to be able to very clearly and easily explain to the whole community how the framework works, and I think that there are absolutely ways that that could be streamlined. As to the point that Brendan just made about the speed within which things are reviewed, we have concerns around the fact that the draft animal welfare legislation that is sitting before everybody at the moment and is likely to be introduced into Parliament has a two-year commencement date, but there is some notion that all of the regulations will be drafted in that period of time. We know that these things take serious consideration, so we have to be really sure across the whole community, as I said, that that framework actually works, and I think more transparency and education around how it operates would be helpful for everybody.

Charles EVERIST: I would just say that the codes, standards and guidelines that have been created thus far have included a broad range of community representatives and industry. I note that a number of submissions that have been before you talk about industry codes of practice, and that the codes are written by industry and that they are owned by industry. That is categorically wrong. They are codes that have been established by government, agreed to by government and legitimate animal welfare groups who do not engage in –

Bev McARTHUR: Propaganda.

Charles EVERIST: Even though I am under privilege, Ms McArthur, I will use my language carefully – improper conduct. Those groups have a say as part of that process as well. Brendan made that point earlier. Everyone has the right and ability to have their say as part of these processes, but it must be done soberly, and the balance needs to be I think reshifted back to evidence-based policy based on science, not on opinion and ideology.

Emma GERMANO: And I guess staging a protest when you do not like the outcomes of the standards and guidelines or the model codes of practice is staging a protest.

Gaelle BROAD: I guess getting that industry input along the way is immensely important. I am just interested – you talked earlier about trespassing and the impact that that is having on farms. I guess as we look to recommendations from this inquiry, what would you like to see, because it seems to me that there have been ongoing attacks on the industry from people that have no right to be on the private property. What is your view? What is your response?

Emma GERMANO: The government put those laws into place. That means that they believed, when the laws were being put into place or when Parliament put those laws into place, that it was because those laws needed to be in place. To see the judicial system fail to back in the laws that were put into place is problematic, and it actually sends a mixed message I think both to farmers and to activists. That is not helpful, but here we are having an inquiry on the basis of that illegal trespass. I think that is a shame, because actually we as an industry are responding also. I mean, there have been calls made by members of the industry in the last few

days or the last few weeks in regard to changing some of the practices. I lament that those things should have happened either six months prior to this inquiry or in six months time so that we are not continually rewarding the bad behaviour, because it actually suggests that that sort of activity should be continued, and I believe it will embolden animal activists to continue to pursue that particular type of advocacy and activism.

Charles EVERIST: Ms Broad, trespass needs to be dealt with through the law of trespass. Yes, we have seen attempts to use other mechanisms to control that behaviour, and that has brought additional benefits, particularly from a biosecurity perspective. Biosecurity is increasingly becoming better understood and the risks and threats that there are to industry, to our community and to human health as a consequence of biosecurity incursions, and we have advocated previously for stronger consideration to how penalties are applied by courts under trespass law. But from the framework that currently exists when it comes to the biosecurity management plans that farmers can have on their farms, what we have seen is whilst the government brought those rules in, we have not seen a whole lot of support in educating the community and enabling farmers to use that mechanism. For instance, if farmers want to have signs up on their farms, that is quite a deal of cost and quite an imposition to them to be able to get the law to work and to be able to address those issues.

Emma GERMANO: So the onus is put back on the farmer, that if you do not have the biosecurity management plan in place, apparently the trespass is not of the same consequence if you did not have the sign up on the gate and the management plan in place on your property.

Brendan TATHAM: And we have just come from a meeting with the Animal Health Committee, which is all of Australia's vets, the people who make the key decisions about when there is a biosecurity incident. Their plan is to have everybody involved in the one health program. That means everybody – it means farmers, it means the community, it means government working together on these matters. Their advice to us, literally 15 minutes ago, was that the biosecurity risk is increasing: as the complexity of international travel, food production and trading systems increases, the biosecurity risk increases. So that is an area I think where Parliament has really been struggling to try and get the balance right. It is about: do we want to look after our food and our food production systems, or do we just want people to be able to do whatever they want to do at whatever time it is? And I think that has been a challenge. What we are kind of seeing from this government is really transferring that risk to the courts, and the courts are not scientists – the courts are dealing with evidence that gets put before them, and they have to review it from the law. So I think the challenge there is for the Parliament to be able to actually identify what the key priorities need to be with our food supply and be able to make sure that legislation is there to protect our food supply.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. I will pick up from there. I just want to touch on the comments about exemptions to be cruel. I presume this is probably in relation some questions I asked yesterday. That is obviously an oversimplification of the legislation and, as you have noted, it is incredibly confusing, but there are certainly exemptions for certain procedures or acts in farming industries that would otherwise be illegal if they were done to our pets. So how do you think the pork industry can justify or reconcile this, especially as we move towards legislating animal sentience?

Emma GERMANO: I think a really clear example of this is the practice of tail docking. There is a difference between farmers – as you have heard, many of them are multigenerational, have grown up on farms and are trained in regard to how you dock a tail to minimise pain and discomfort – and somebody cutting off their cat's tail at home. So I think that to acknowledge that farming practices are very specific and are undertaken by people who are skilled operators on that farming property is completely appropriate, because the animal husbandry understanding that farmers have far surpasses that of the general community in regard to just looking after a cat or dog.

The CHAIR: But you are still not required to be a vet to undertake a surgical procedure on a farm – correct?

Emma GERMANO: No, but I would suggest to you that if you have done that activity many, many times and been given training, I think the relevance as to whether or not you are a vet starts to slip away.

The CHAIR: On transparency measures, there were comments before about how you understand that this is an argument that if activists were not collecting this footage then how would they know what is going on? Obviously, the collection of that footage, while I completely acknowledge it could be distressing to farmers and

producers, has resulted in many people being shocked and turning away from the industry, which is ultimately a threat to the industry. What transparency measures would you support being put in place to help people learn and understand what is going on at farms, because it is not like the public can visit them. We have had active opposition to live streaming of CCTV. What transparency measures would you support?

Brendan TATHAM: I think you will find when you talk with DEECA and PrimeSafe in a couple of weeks – if you ask the question appropriately – you will understand the measures that they have got in place. In many cases, in fact in most cases –

The CHAIR: Could you tell us some?

Brendan TATHAM: Pardon?

The CHAIR: Could you tell us some that are in place?

Brendan TATHAM: I am not in a position to be able to be able to speak about the details of what government agencies do, but I did work for them for a number of years.

The CHAIR: But I mean if they are to be shared with the public so they –

Brendan TATHAM: I will discuss what I think –

Charles EVERIST: Ms Purcell, they are well noted in DEECA's submission to the inquiry –

The CHAIR: Transparency, yes.

Charles EVERIST: So I would refer you to DEECA's submission.

The CHAIR: Yes. I mean, I am not aware of anything that is publicly –

Charles EVERIST: You should read DEECA's submission.

The CHAIR: I absolutely will before they appear here. Yes, it is in a few weeks time. Obviously I have been focusing on today's witnesses.

Brendan TATHAM: The elements of what the regulators actually see, and it is in their submissions, with regard to complaints – there are a small number of complaints that they see, and a percentage of those are actually verified. I think the element there is that there are a range of practices which are actually normal practices. Yes, we can use technology to be able to improve those practices over time, but there is a severe misunderstanding about what is the practice of being able to produce food and food animals. The ideology that sits behind that is really based, from my perspective, in a misunderstanding of what it is that is required to manage animals which are used to produce food. It is a respectable business. It is something that the community wants.

The CHAIR: Yes. I guess we are probably going to go round in circles on this, but I guess my point is: people cannot make reports or complaints if they cannot see or know what is going on, and that is the issue that we are facing here and why we have these opposing views on the topic.

Emma GERMANO: Can I address that question. There are many industries that do not have mandatory CCTV footage in place, despite there being particular vulnerabilities, that is live streamed to the public for multitudes of reasons, including protecting the privacy of people who work in those establishments. I have really grappled with this personally – this particular issue around transparency. If you want to find out what happens on a farm, to suggest that you cannot find out I think is a fallacy. You absolutely can. There are many producers who will, within biosecurity constraints, allow you to have a look at how their businesses operate. Again, to reference the vice-president of the Victorian Farmers Federation, she set up a virtual reality experience. You can actually look through her caged chicken facility – egg facility – in Werribee South and you can see with full transparency. I think to suggest that people do not know what happens to an animal in order for it to get to their plate is a gross exaggeration, and to say that people are now turning away from the industry because of the exposes I also think is not correct. I think we say many people are turning away from the industry. There is no quantification to the statement that you just made.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Brendan TATHAM: Let me perhaps just finish on that one.

The CHAIR: Very quickly, because I am almost out of time.

Brendan TATHAM: Of course. I think there is an opportunity if you are looking for recommendations to help bridge the urban–rural divide, because it gets bigger. There are 5 million people in Melbourne and a million people in country Victoria, and 5 million people in Melbourne like going on holidays but they do not understand where their food comes from. I think that is a real pity because there is a massive opportunity for great news stories in being able to have the broader community understand where their food comes from. I think that is something that the government would accept a recommendation on.

The CHAIR: Just finally on oversimplifications: of course we heard comments before that 1 to 2 per cent of the population is vegan, and that is the reason why we are apparently having this inquiry. We know that in fact 12 per cent of the population is vegetarian, and we have even more religious groups –

Gaelle BROAD: Chair, more time.

The CHAIR: I am going into a question, yes. I gave Mrs McArthur more time.

Bev McARTHUR: Really?

The CHAIR: There are even more religious groups who do not consume pork. I think the point is it is not just vegans who care about animal welfare, and that is something that has overwhelmingly come through in our submissions from a number of meat eaters. So what welfare improvements can be made for the people who still want to consume pork?

Emma GERMANO: If we impart upon this committee anything, it is absolutely not just vegans who care about animal welfare, because in fact we are the people that have to deal with our animals, treat our animals, look after and attend to our animals, day in and day out. So as a producer I find that somewhat of an inflammatory statement. To be vegetarian – again, we cannot start overinflating the numbers of people who choose to not eat meat on the basis of their ethics around the treatment of animals and animal welfare. As we know, vegetarians happily consume other animal products. So I think that is problematic. We must ensure that everybody has the opportunity to choose what they are eating with full transparency. Again, if I am a producer, and I am a producer – I sell lambs directly off my own property and give anybody the opportunity to find out what happens on our properties. It is an opportunity for the industry to continue to build on that transparency. But again, this is going to be and has always been, as Brendan has said, a process of evolution, not revolution. And yet some of the recommendations that are being put to you are that we should shut down an industry overnight with no regard to the consequences.

Charles EVERIST: Ms Purcell, I would also note to have some caution around people who may claim to enjoy eating meat and have put submissions into this inquiry saying that, when in fact they do not. I am aware that there may have been a campaign to encourage people to put submissions into the inquiry falsifying their own personal positions to appear to be something that they are not.

The CHAIR: I am not aware of that, so if you would like to share it with the committee, we would welcome it.

Charles EVERIST: Sure.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I mean the submission process, not the survey responses. There are two different ones.

Charles EVERIST: Well, the surveys are submissions, so I was referring to the surveys.

The CHAIR: Okay. Right. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. First of all, I think there is a huge attack being levelled at farmers, regardless of the undisputed fact that everyone of us does rely on them. Yesterday we heard that the pork industry in particular has lost social licence. What do you say to that?

Emma GERMANO: It is interesting because it is almost like: which cab is first off the rank? I am not privy to the conversations that animal activists have in regard to their strategies as to taking down one industry at a time, as certainly appears to be the case. As we heard yesterday, and we have just had the statement, this is particularly about pigs – it is not. We heard from the animal activists that it is lamb, it is beef, it is chicken, it is eggs, it is so on and so forth. I think the intensified nature of the pork industry – which, mind you, has evolved in that manner precisely because of animal welfare and the way that you can best care for a large number of pigs – is an easy industry to target because you have a large number of animals in production in a small space. It is far easier to collect evidence if you are illegally trespassing in what would be called an intensive system than on other farms and other properties.

Brendan TATHAM: I do not believe that the pork industry has lost its social licence at all. I think there are some people that do not like the fact that pork gets eaten, but I think the vast majority of the Victorian, Australian and international community absolutely want to eat pork. You will notice that the conditions under which pork producers need to operate from an economic perspective are to combat imports of pork meat – subsidised imports of pork meat – from other countries, and that puts an environment around the pork industry which does make it incredibly competitive, so they are looking to try and run a viable business to produce products that people want to consume. Some cultures absolutely rely on pork and will never move from it, so I do not accept that the pork industry has lost its social licence – quite the opposite. I think the international and the Australian community absolutely love pork meat and want to continue to eat it, and the challenge, as we have always had, is for scientists and industry and the community to be able to identify better ways to do that into the future.

Emma GERMANO: The most ridiculous outcome that we could imagine here is that we see a shutting down of the Victorian pork industry and the Australian pork industry and then we continue to import products from other jurisdictions where we have no meaningful contribution to the animal welfare standards. That would be the most ridiculous outcome.

Renee HEATH: Just on that, one question I asked a witness today was how many meals in Victoria or Australia per year would involve meat, and of course they did not know how many. Obviously if we took meat out of the market it would have to be replaced with some sort of substitute. What do you think? Is that even viable? What would the economic outcomes of that be? What would the potential nutritional outcomes on the population be? Do you have any idea of that sort of impact?

Brendan TATHAM: There is not enough protein produced to be able to substitute the removal of animal products, and if you would like us just to eat lentils from India, go straight ahead, but that is not what everybody wants.

Emma GERMANO: And even if we were to all start eating lentils from India, India has a problem with their level of water. The watertable is dropping by 1 metre per annum in that country. So again, everything will have its outcome. Even if we were to convert every piece of land that is currently being used for livestock production, and of course not all of it can sustain the growing of crops, there is a difference between proteinaceous crops and carbonaceous crops. To actually be able to get that level of protein in crops, we are talking about some kind of utopian idea here that also seems to presuppose the notion that no animals are harmed in the making of vegetables or of our broadacre crops. We have a problem with ducks on my cauliflower farm; we get a permit to manage some of those ducks. We have a problem with rabbits on our cauliflower farm; we have management practices in place to manage rabbits. There are many mice that are killed in the making of broadacre crops. To suggest that anything that we eat does not have an impact on animals or on the climate or on the environment is just simply not true. That would demonstrate a gross misunderstanding of food production.

Renee HEATH: So closing down, even if it was within the two-year time period that is being suggested, would lead to food shortages?

Emma GERMANO: There is absolutely no doubt about it, because even if you were to remove pork meat, and on average per capita 26 kilograms of pork meat is consumed per annum, then that is going to have to be replaced with something. If we decide that pork is the evil of all of the meats, which is a nonsense, it will only serve to force up the price of chicken and red meat and fish. So you have this ongoing kind of snowball effect from any decision that is made, and that is what is so crucial for the committee to understand – that any action has a reaction. Any decisions that are made have a consequence, and generally the people that suffer the consequences are those that cannot afford food already today. We already have poor people today and we already have food insecurity today, so any further pressure on the system that does not acknowledge the reality of the economy that we live in will most impact the people who are the most vulnerable in this society. So there is an animal welfare issue that we as farmers – I think if you do not like animals, you are not an animal farmer. It is not possible, I can tell you that. We can focus on animal welfare, and it is a blessing that we live in a country where we have the capacity to contemplate animal welfare, but there is human welfare that we always need to keep at the heart of the decisions that we make.

I would just like to tell a really quick story, if you will indulge me. I did a Nuffield scholarship in 2014 which looked at the global production of food, all around the globe. I was in India, and I was looking at what was both a dairy and a chicken farm. I had spent some time in a coffee plantation, which meant that I ended up having a leech on my ankle. I went to take a leak somewhere, because that is an adventure in India in and of itself, and as I was doing that the leech fell off my ankle and there was blood everywhere. So I was already feeling quite sick. And then I looked and saw a pen of chickens where there was a giant pile of dead chickens and a small number of chickens still left in the pen, and that was apparently a production system. Rightly, having grown up in Australia with our animal welfare standards, I found that really quite appalling, and I thought, ‘Gee whiz, there are some animal welfare issues here.’ That afternoon we travelled from those farms and went and saw a slum that had two- and three-year-old children sifting around in the dirt trying to find some metal to sell for a few rupees to see if they could assist – these two- and three-year-old children – their family to feed themselves. Animal welfare and the standards that we have are a reflection of the society that we live in, so we should be mighty honoured to sit here and have this conversation, but to have it, again, from any perspective that is hostile or that is adversarial or that shows disrespect to the people who put their hearts and souls into producing food for Australians I think is unacceptable.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. Could I have one more question?

The CHAIR: I was just going to say we have 3 minutes left. I am more than happy for the opposition MPs to decide between them if they have any further questions.

Renee HEATH: My quick question is – and as you would have seen, recently in the upper house the Greens tried to put through an inquiry into price gouging within supermarkets because of the cost-of-living crisis – would what we heard yesterday, phasing out the meat industry, increase the cost of food or would it decrease the cost of food?

Emma GERMANO: It would absolutely increase the cost of food because you would simply take more volume off the market. I think you raised a really interesting point there around the supermarket inquiry, and part of the issue that we have in regard to this food supply system is that when we get to where the majority of food is bought and sold in this country, being the supermarkets, there is very little differentiation for producers. You saw producers who told you that they voluntarily moved away from sow stalls, their ability to differentiate themselves for making advances in animal welfare standards, which of course leads the rest of the production community behind them. There are always these leaders who will take the next step. It is difficult for them to be financially rewarded for the increases that they make in animal welfare, so we are always kind of at the lowest common denominator. Part of that issue is that the practices that supermarkets use do absolutely have an impact on the conversation that we are having right now.

Bev McARTHUR: Emma, you touched on two very important aspects: (1) that this idea that we can all transfer to plant-based farming is a complete nonsense and (2) the number of animals that are slaughtered in the production process of plant-based products. The amount of mice that get lost in the wheat production, the amount of bees that get lost in the almond production and the amount of insects that get lost in the tomato production are all consequences. To say that animal welfare only revolves around pigs, chickens, lambs and cows is a nonsense when plant-based production is going to decimate those sorts of animal aspects as well.

Emma GERMANO: I would further your point there on the basis that on our farm – I have a mixed livestock and vegetable farm – we moved to full vegetable production for a period of time, and actually the productivity and the yield started to decrease. When we reintroduced livestock into our rotation – there is no better fertiliser than the sheep and the cattle that are walking around on my farm – they actually enhanced the vegetable and, again, even broadacre crops, although we see less of that. A lot of farmers are mixed farmers, and that livestock rotation adds a lot of benefit to the growing of non-meat products. We heard Tim Kingma today talking about how the effluent that is produced on their farms is highly sought after as a fertiliser product for people who are growing plants.

Bev McARTHUR: And then some of us, who cannot grow crops in many areas, cannot transfer to plant-based production.

Emma GERMANO: Absolutely not.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, members. That concludes the hearing.

Committee adjourned.