

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply

Geelong – Tuesday 21 May 2024

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Anna Fedele, Acting Executive Officer, Victorian Chicken Growers' Council.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for joining us today at this public hearing of the Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply.

On behalf of the committee I acknowledge that we are on the lands of the Wadawurrung people and pay my respects to elders past and present and also to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from other communities who may be here with us today, as well as, more broadly, the Aboriginal community of Geelong, who are also part of the stolen generation.

This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting as part of our inquiry into securing Victoria's food supply. I will run through some of the important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you very much for making the time to meet the committee today. Would you please state your full name and title before we begin.

Anna FEDELE: My name is Anna Fedele, and I am currently the Acting Executive Officer for the Victorian Chicken Growers' Council.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will just introduce myself. I am Juliana, I am the Chair of the committee and I represent the seat of Wendouree. Next to me I have Martin Cameron, who represents Morwell down in the Latrobe Valley. Next to Martin we have Nicole Werner, who represents Warrandyte. Then we have David Hodgett, who represents Croydon. To my right, Martha Haylett, representing Ripon, so Central Highlands, and Jordan Crugnale, representing Pakenham, all the way past Pakenham and all the way down to the Bass Coast and Clyde. Clyde, Jordan?

Jordan CRUGNALE: Yes, Pearcedale, Clyde and over to Phillip Island.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Over to you, Anna, for any opening remarks.

Anna FEDELE: Okay. I will just go in. Obviously, I am Anna Fedele. I am currently the Acting Executive Officer for the Victorian Chicken Growers' Council. I am also a farmer and have been a meat chicken grower since 2014. I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak on securing the Victorian food supply. My submission is based on farmers' concern and also what I have experienced as a grower.

As you may be aware, chicken is the most consumed meat in Australia. We eat around 50 kilos of meat chicken on average, each person, per year. In Victoria alone we process around 3.5 million chickens a week. That is approximately 187 million chickens a year, and we consume pretty much that amount as well. Some interesting facts: the meat poultry industry, including turkeys, produce around only 6 per cent of the total carbon emissions of any other livestock industries. We are the most efficient user of land of any of the animal agricultural enterprises. We are the most efficient user of feed of any other animal production meat, and we are an incredibly efficient use of water.

So my response to the inquiry, basically, is on the impacts of urban sprawl and population growth on arable land on the farming industry in Victoria. As you know, we only use around 4 per cent of the arable land area for agricultural production, which is quite small. Victoria remains the fastest growing state in Australia. Currently the population is around 6.8 million, which means demand is growing for more food and more housing, which will also increase the challenges we face if houses are built closer to farmland.

Some of the challenges we face in our industry because of the way we grow birds – and I am sure other industries as well – are odour and dust emissions, both real and perceived, on future residents of any dwellings. There is currently not really any protection for farming when faced with complaints. One example is the EPA believes smells should be kept within the boundary of a property. I am not sure how it is achieved on a windy day; the smell is very objective. Also noise emissions – we use fans to keep birds comfortable; it is all about animal welfare. Depopulation of the birds is more ideal in the evening. Transportation at night is cooler – the birds travel better, and there is less traffic – and we also have light spill from our sheds. The heightened biosecurity risk is a really big thing for us, because if houses are closer there may be a greater risk of disease outbreaks if they have domestic chickens, birds or animals that may carry disease.

Then we will go into the use of planning controls and protecting agricultural land in green wedge and peri-urban areas. Green wedges and peri-urban areas were put in place obviously to protect agriculture use. The truth is it does not really do what it states to protect agricultural land and its use. We need to protect our farmland. I will give you some examples. Currently in some council areas it is difficult to get permits to upgrade facilities even though it is stated in the broiler code how it is to be applied. For example, to upgrade an existing farm to their original licensing stock density numbers – which is based on 21.5 per square metre, which has changed due to density and animal welfare – is difficult and it should not be. Even for new farms, greenfield sites have their own challenges due to buffer zones. I understand why they are in place, but it makes it difficult for anyone to find land to build a new farm, and the increase in food miles is probably not as palatable for the processors.

Then we have the EPA. Another great example is how the EPA defines litter. It is now industrial waste, after hundreds of years of chicken farming. Spent litter is the most important thing for our ecosystem as it regenerates crops and it contains things like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and high levels of organic matter. That is to name a few. It helps with soil moisture, improves soil structure and encourages organisms, such as earthworms. Litter is so important to our food bowl. It is an organic fertiliser that helps produce our wonderful fruit and veg. It is definitely not industrial waste.

Then we have planning controls, which are currently in my opinion subjective, as new residents have a lack of understanding of the green wedge and its use. There is lack of legislation to stop people complaining and trying to stop farming in all regions because they do not want in it in their backyard, even though we have the right to farm. This is something that I think would be great if the Victorian government could implement it. The Victorian government needs to lead the charge and put it in place, just as the French Senate government on 12 March this year approved a law protecting farmers against growing complaints from neighbouring properties. If you are going to allow more housing but you want more farming, this protection should be put in place to protect our farmers and our food supplies. This will also reduce unnecessary complaints that need to be investigated by the shires and help unlock VCAT from people trying to close down farms.

Then we have got the resilience of our Victorian food system, including production of food and its transport and sale. In my opinion the Victorian food system has changed; it is not as resilient as it used to be. The reasons I believe are the legislation in its current form is not in favour of farming; planning for new farms or existing farms to expand the current buffer zoning limits where it can be and places an impact on the all-important food miles; urbanisation pushing farmers out further or completely; increasing regulations placed on farms or farmers; increasing costs of rates, electricity, gas and wages; the government's gas ban domestically – what guarantee do we have that it will not spill into commercial, as we need our gas; climate change and cost involved; lack of incentives to entice people to invest in Victoria, as it is high cost and to find workers is extremely difficult and may make farmers or processors walk away; EPA regulations that have been implemented; and poor road and infrastructure in all regions.

Lastly, one of our biggest issues we are faced with is we have an ageing population of farmers. Generational farming is less and less because a younger generation have seen what their parents have gone through, which could be avoided with better government support to protect and encourage farming. How I believe that this could be achieved are: incentives to farms – i.e. tax breaks on amenity costs; easier access to grants to improve or start a farm and more training; legislation to ensure a farmer's right to farm; deny any complaints and allow farmers to do their job; have the council and the EPA on the same page; EPA to be reviewed, as some of the laws need to be revoked and I believe there was consultation but not all of it was taken on board; planning to be unified to encourage farming and make it easier to build or upgrade a farm to ensure our food supply; green wedge and peri-urban to live up to its true meaning; and invest into roads and infrastructure. We need everyone

to have a better understanding of farming and how important it is. We live in the lucky country; let us ensure it remains a lucky country that is full of resources. Let us maintain our food source; let us not lose it. Save farming for tomorrow's generation and beyond. Thank you all.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Anna. That is a really, really great way to start our hearings. I am just wondering if I could just kick off: can you tell us a bit about your farm and where it is located and any challenges that you are facing as a family or some of the challenges that you have put out there?

Anna FEDELE: Yes. We have a free-range farm that is located on the Mornington Peninsula. A lot of our challenges are because housing is getting closer, and it is more of a lifestyle area. I think Gippsland will go down the same way: people want to live here but they do not actually want farming in their backyard. The challenge we face is when we were able to upgrade our farm to its capacity, as I said, we had a lot of complaints because of the new technology of our sheds or whatever. Our neighbours actually tried to close us down, because they did not want us to farm, even though the farm has been here since 1960. We have not changed the use of the farm, we have not changed the footprint of the farm. We have just upgraded it, basically. So people are not understanding that if you are near a farm, there will be smell, there will be noise. This is how you eat your food, how it sits on your plate. Unfortunately, people cannot coincide with where their food comes from compared to how we have to run our farm. Chicken farming is intense farming, so it is a little bit different than maybe some farming, but it is the most consumed meat in Australia. We need to protect it.

The CHAIR: Anna, just anecdotally in terms of where your farm is, how have your neighbourhood or neighbouring properties changed since you have been there, or since the 1960s?

Anna FEDELE: Well, for example, when people were starting to come into these areas, the shire allowed the land to be subdivided because people started complaining about the farms, and unfortunately it has changed because agricultural activity is not readily – as it used to be. Predominantly now I guess the Mornington Peninsula is known for its beautiful vineyards and food, so most of our neighbouring properties are, I would say, hobby farms. They are not actually producing anything. Our farm alone, per batch, will probably create 40 to 50 jobs, from pick-up with people that bring us the feed to people that clean out our sheds – not to say that Inghams alone employs over 700 people in their processing plant – while the properties around them do not actually produce anything but their gardener. It is more of a lifestyle for them.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you for sharing that. Deputy Chair – Martin.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you, and thank you, Anna, for your presentation. I am in the seat of Morwell, which is in the Latrobe Valley, so I am hearing you. We have had issues with chicken farming around the Toongabbie area and also around the Rosedale area, where they have expanded and come into some elaborate set-ups that they do have. One of their major issues, obviously, is people encroaching around the farms and the issue of smell. There was a lot of media coverage on that, a lot of social media around that. How have the planning restrictions affected you in this area, if you have had them? Have councils changed the rules a little bit or the EPA? Or have these rules been set in stone for a long time?

Anna FEDELE: Well, the broiler code was brought in in 2009 and then amended in 2018 to help give better guidelines for councils or shires to make a decision on where farms are based. Even in Toongabbie they will have the 1-kilometre buffer zone from the edge of the farm to the edge of the house on the neighbouring property, which gives it quite a bit buffer zone. Sorry, can you just repeat your question again? I have just lost my train of thought.

Martin CAMERON: It was just on how the planning restrictions and regulations are affecting you over the issues of smell and people getting closer to your farm.

Anna FEDELE: Basically, the EPA makes it very difficult, because smell is objective, so it depends which day you come out, what age your birds are and how it affects your farm. I could walk past somewhere and it will not smell for me, but it may smell for you. So the EPA, especially the way they have changed what 'litter' is, using it as industrial waste, it is a big issue for us, because we have stockpiles or whatever it is, and people can complain and shut you down. Even with the shire, when you do have a complaint – I can tell you from my experience that even when the shire sends out a letter to the neighbouring property or whatever to say, 'Write a logbook' and whatever, it also has a disclaimer saying, 'If it gives you any medical issues, that you should consult a doctor and do all of this,' so it is basically giving you a right to complain. There is no real cover for us

farming, even though we were there prior to them. It is like me going near an airport and saying, 'I don't want the planes near me.' It is the same thing, so there is no real protection against farms. And the challenge is, because no-one really wants to deal with the issue, they just palm it off to the next person, and then you end up at VCAT. So basically the EPA are not the best for farming in my opinion.

Martin CAMERON: Okay. So you are just virtually waiting for the next complaint to be raised for you to end up in VCAT to sort it out?

Anna FEDELE: Yes, basically. I will use my farm as an example. We upgraded to our permissible numbers of 21.5. We upgraded the sheds. We made them slightly bigger, but we have the same stock density. We have not changed any of that. With that comes technology, and you have a little bit on farms. In the broiler code it states if it is an existing farm that is upgrading – not expanding, upgrading – which is what we did, you do not need any of the modelling of the noise, the sound, the smell or any of that. That is what the shire took it from. They did the right thing, but then the neighbours were able to complain about it, which means that they wanted to shut us down because there was a bit more noise than what they thought there was going to be, even though it was planned, it was approved and it was built. The shire basically wiped their hands and we had to go to VCAT to fight them.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Nicole.

Nicole WERNER: I am interested in your submission, that notes that the planning restrictions in the green wedge areas make it difficult. I know you have already spoken to that where it pertains to the EPA, but we have been looking a lot at the green wedge, so I would be very interested as to how that has impacted you.

Anna FEDELE: I think what it is is even though it is agricultural activity and you are allowed to do it, as this is what it is for, unfortunately the shires and things like that are very scared, as soon as they get an objection from the neighbour, to actually follow through with what the green wedge is meant to be. If they do not want to make a decision, then it ends up going, once again, to VCAT. So what we need is a tightening of the green wedge to allow farms to farm, and that is why the right for them not to complain or do anything like that is so important and also for us to be able to follow whatever the broiler code states with our farms or whatever other farms are around. At the moment it is kind of like if someone complains, it is too hard.

Martha HAYLETT: Anna, I was just going to ask: can you share a little bit more about the experiences of farms when they go to VCAT? Obviously each VCAT hearing would be very different, but what are the experiences at VCAT of your members or the different farmers that you deal with? Can you elaborate on that a little bit more?

Anna FEDELE: With VCAT it is very subjective of whoever you get that is doing your case, because with some of the people that are in front of VCAT, if that actual judge or whatever has not actually dealt with this area, their knowledge is not very vast. There was one case where they wanted to increase their density, and they did not allow it because they did not really understand it. Then in other cases it is not a problem because they understand the broiler code. Even with the EPA there was a farm not far from us that had really big issues with smell and that. Even though the farm had not changed in 60 years, because one person built their big house across the road and it affected them, the EPA came out and basically made them do all this stuff. They got to the point of the person taking them to VCAT, then they actually pulled it out, realising that probably they could not win in the end. The problem was this person built a big house. The shire should protect the farm that is already there, and they do not. This is the problem. We are put under stress. You will have the shire knocking on your door saying, 'Oh, we've had a complaint; we've got to come out,' and then it just does not stop if the people do not stop. You just want to do your job. Everyone else has a right to go to work. We do not get to go to work and come home, we live on the farms; we live and breathe it 24/7. The problem is that you get to a point where some farmers probably do get very depressed because they can see it and they are thinking, 'When's the next complaint coming?' It is really difficult to be on the land and have that around you constantly.

The CHAIR: David, did you want to ask a question?

David HODGETT: Yes. Hi, Anna. Similar to Nicole, I am just actually looking for a figure. I do not know if you know off the top of your head how many chicken farming places there are in the state. If not, maybe we

can look it up or take it on notice. But similar to Nicole's issue, you talked in your submission about making it difficult to upgrade operations, and certainly I am out near Yarra Ranges way, so we experienced Marven Poultry, before they sold out many years ago, and the challenges they faced with neighbours and the EPA and that sort of thing. But I am looking for two things. One is perhaps an example of upgrading your operations – are they minor or major, and are you still getting blocked for minor things to just improve efficiencies and operations? And back to Nicole's point, I guess, is there enough in the planning already, and you just need the planning enforced properly to allow you to go about your business, as opposed to just getting into a dispute with neighbours who might be encroaching on the farm?

Anna FEDELE: Yes, okay. The first one is with the upgrading of farms and animal welfare changes – so, the stock density per square metre. Historically, it was 21.5 birds per square metre when the farms first started, and as time has gone on, with RSPCA and FREPA standards or whatever, it has diminished down to probably an average of 16.5. The broiler code allows you to expand – you are not expanding actually but just putting your licensing numbers back to the original numbers of when the farm was first built. The problem, I believe, as to your second point, is that they should follow the farm practicing. Even in the broiler code it states that you may not need to advertise it, and you actually should not because you are not changing your footprint; you are just upgrading your facilities so you can have your licensing numbers.

David HODGETT: Yes, I am with you.

Anna FEDELE: So, to your point, yes, the broiler code is quite good; the only challenge I think it has is that it should be followed by councils and shires. That way it would make it easier for everyone to make decisions. I know the buffer zone is quite big, but as our growth is getting bigger, as in our population, we need some kinds of provisions to allow these because we will not have enough numbers for our population. The last thing you want to do is get your chicken meat from South America or somewhere like that where it is diseased. So yes, we have it in place. We have the broiler code, it has been updated and we have done everything; we just need to follow it. I guess everything is subjective.

David HODGETT: Yes, that is right. Thank you.

Anna FEDELE: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Jordan.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Yes, I will ask a question. Hi, Anna. My name is Jordan. I have got the area around Clyde, which has Inghams; Lang Lang, which has Daily Fresh Eggs; and Bimbadeen over on Phillip Island, which I was just telling my colleague is probably the most free-range kind of farm in the state, because there are no foxes on Phillip Island. Putting that aside, I was keen to hear, when you spoke about the French putting in legislation, if you could sort of expand on that. How is it working? Do they have the sort of intensity of broiler farms that we do here? What lessons can we learn here, and would any of them be applicable for us to take on? It is a very long question.

Anna FEDELE: I do think it will. It was just put in on 12 March this year, so I am not quite sure how it is being applied, but from my understanding it is basically saying if you are near agricultural land or agricultural activity you cannot complain about smell, noise or all the things that I was discussing earlier, which protects the farmers. America has got quite a few states that have done the same thing quite successfully. I think it is a good thing to put in place, because it does protect our areas; also, for us farmers, we know that we can do our day-to-day work without getting complaints and be able to do our job. I am not quite sure how it is going. I will keep an eye out for it. They did it a few years ago in some provinces of France, and it really helped their agriculture sector. And they are all about sustainability now, as the rest of the world is, and supplying their own food sources. I think it would be a very good thing if we were able to do that too.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Martha.

Martha HAYLETT: Thank you, Anna. I am Martha. I am Member for Ripon. I have got a few broiler farm issues actually on the slow burn at the moment just around Carisbrook and Maryborough in the Central Goldfields shire. But I am just wondering: the issues that you are dealing with, are they actually forcing the

chicken farms and the chicken farmers further and further out, and how is that affecting their businesses? But also, I am just wondering if there are any examples of councils across Victoria who are actually really trying to work really well with you and are almost examples of councils that are best practice for you and your farming businesses. Or is it just that there are so many restrictions currently that it is a little bit hard for individual councils to do anything?

Anna FEDELE: I think every individual council does do it differently. I was just speaking to the Cardinia shire not long ago, and they are being proactive about keeping agriculture in their area, which I think is good. Mornington Peninsula did do – years ago they were really strong about agriculture, but for some reason it has now kind of slipped behind. I think each shire does whatever suits their shire, which kind of is good in some aspects. I know out Gippsland way they are pretty good for farms to expand and grow and stuff, but the problem is, going back to your other point, old farms close down, because most of the farmers are old farmers. Probably the average chicken farmer is about 65. That means that the next generation sees what they go through, and they choose not to. So a lot of the farms that are near the Mornington Peninsula or closer to the inner city or down Werribee way you will see are closing down for subdivisions, especially on that side of town. The problem with Victoria is we have only really got three processors. We have got Inghams on the south-east side of town, we have got Turosi, which has kind of come south-east and on the other side of town, and then we have got Hazeldene's, which is purely Geelong way. It makes it difficult for people to find land to build their farms. Another issue is there really is not any competition, so you are really stuck to one processor based on where you build. It has got to be in their area, and that is another issue that we face.

Jordan CRUGNALE: I just want to ask, because you spoke about Inghams, which you know is in Clyde, and there are quite a few estates literally across the road from Inghams: has anything changed with them as a member of the growers' council? What have been some of the issues there, given literally the residents are across the road?

Anna FEDELE: That is where their feed mill is placed, in Clyde. There is not a farm there, so it is not so bad. I think they are going to upgrade it, or they will probably find another place, probably more Gippsland way, to rebuild it. That is where they will probably end up getting pushed out. So that is not the actual farm; it is just the feed mill in Clyde for Inghams at this point.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Right. I should have known that.

The CHAIR: Anna, you were just talking about access to processing. What we have heard from beef and pork growers is that it can be difficult for them to access abattoirs for their processing. How significant is this an issue for your chicken growers, and what are the challenges chicken growers face getting their produce processed and sold?

Anna FEDELE: So for us I guess we are lucky in the way that we do not actually sell our birds. It is up to the company to do that, and they process our birds. The issue we face is if Inghams decides to close down, all of the farms on the south-east and Gippsland will probably face closure because it will be too far in food miles for the other processors to pick up. They allow about an hour and that is about it – any further, forget it.

Martha HAYLETT: How are other states and territories dealing with these similar issues, Anna? Are there any best case examples of anyone interstate who is doing a bit better than Victoria?

Anna FEDELE: I think South Australia, they allow farms to be – there are a lot more superfarms, should I say, in South Australia than what there is in Victoria. They allow expansion to happen a bit easier than what we do here. Because, obviously, of where everything is geographically placed, it is easier for the growers to go from processor to processor, unlike in Victoria, where we are so far away. I am not sure about New South Wales, but one thing I do know is that our eco laws are probably harder than any other state. When it comes to, like I said, making litter and industrial waste, when it goes on organic farms and then is sold as organic food – I mean, it makes no sense.

Martin CAMERON: Anna, you talked about the generational farmer. It does not matter what you are farming, we are hearing the concerns that the next generation just do not want to be on the land. In your view moving forward 10 or 20 years into the future, are we going to be heading towards having these superfarms in clusters and having an Inghams in the area as well? So it is not just going to be the farms, but it will actually be where the produce goes to.

Anna FEDELE: Yes. Because of the cost of everything and the unavailability of land, especially like where we are in the Mornington Peninsula where we are unable to expand our farms, I think you will find that there will be more superfarms. We have probably got the biggest farms in the whole of the world. Even America does not have farms as big as what we have – nowhere. Europe have all small farms. And actually you make a good point, because superfarms are mainly run by super funds, which is problematic too, because if they decide it is not worth their money, they are not getting whatever the return is that they want for that day of the week, they could easily shut down, and where that is going to leave us, I do not know. But I know in Europe in some of the towns – we will go back to Abruzzo – they actually help the farmers to build farms and do things to keep it within their regions.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Other questions? I just had one, and my brain has gone absolutely blank – no, it has come back. Anna, I am astounded. We eat a lot of chicken at home, so we are big contributors to the 50 kilograms per person figure. It is certainly a favourite at our house. In terms of this inquiry looking at food supply and securing food supply, what are the other big threats to the industry that you see that could really impact on my family and families and individuals across Victoria being able to enjoy their chicken?

Anna FEDELE: One of the biggest things is that if they allow the importation of chicken, it is going to impact us a lot. And that is a big issue, because we have high biosecurity. We have high standards. We get audited by the RSPCA two or three times a year, plus we get audited from the processors and we have vets come out quite frequently to ensure our standards. Our biggest threat is if importation is opened. Also a big threat for our industry is if we cannot build enough shedding. That would make importation – supermarkets would love it. They would be like, ‘Yay, cheap meat’ – even cheaper, should I say.

The CHAIR: And where would this be getting imported from? What are the big global markets for chicken?

Anna FEDELE: Big places like South America, Chile, Asia are huge, and they would do it at a very low – Indonesia is leading the way for industries, so probably there as well.

Martha HAYLETT: And is that a live threat right now, Anna?

Anna FEDELE: Not at the moment, because AI, avian influenza, is –

The CHAIR: I was just about to ask about avian influenza.

Anna FEDELE: It is everywhere around the world. We are probably lucky that we have not copped it yet, but who is to say when we will. That is probably our biggest thing. They do not want to import something that may carry diseases of any other type as well – salmonella and things like that.

Martha HAYLETT: Another stat request, Anna, which you can take on notice as well, is: how many people are supported employment-wise through the chicken farming industry? Do you have any stats on exactly how many people are employed?

Anna FEDELE: Would you want to know the processing plants, or would you prefer the farms, depending on the size of the farm? If you want to let me know which one – both?

Martha HAYLETT: Maybe the whole sector, or both. I do not know if you can split them.

Anna FEDELE: Yes. I will split them, because farms are run very differently from the processing plants. I know Inghams employs around 750, but each farm is different. I will just take it on notice and give you a bit of modelling on a superfarm compared to a farm like mine.

Martha HAYLETT: That would be great. Thank you.

Nicole WERNER: I have a bit of a different question.

The CHAIR: Go for it, Nicole.

Nicole WERNER: I am interested in if, as the producer, you have had any impact with animal welfare. I know that you have got a free-range farm, so it is not so much for you guys, but there has been more and more publicity about animal welfare, particularly with chicken farms. I feel like I see that a lot in the news, in the media. Has that had any impact on production, on public perception or on people purchasing – or not really – that you have seen?

Anna FEDELE: I think the biggest perception, which is not true, is that we use antibiotics, and we do not. Another thing is that we cage our chickens, and we do not. Really the only issue for us as farmers is the increasing – like, I know that it has not been passed, but there has been a Bill put forward for a new animal welfare code, which is pretty bad for farmers. I am not sure where it is at – it has not hit Parliament yet – but I have had a look at it and written a submission about it, and it is pretty shocking. Our biggest issue is, I guess, the perception of chickens, like you said, being in cages, and they are not. We do not use antibiotics or hormones, and people actually think we use hormones to make them big. They are genetically bred that way. Our other biggest issue is probably people like the animal welfare people trying to shut down these farms, thinking that they are pets, and they are not. They are bred to eat.

Nicole WERNER: When you say you do not, is that as in industry-wide there are no hormones or antibiotics used, or is that just specifically your farm?

Anna FEDELE: Antibiotics are not used in most – unless it is absolutely necessary, no antibiotics are used in free-range farms currently, and also there have never been hormones in chickens, because by the time the chickens are ready to be processed the hormones would have only just kicked in anyway. So there are no hormones. Everyone says, ‘Oh, they’re on steroids.’ No. They are just crossbred with big chickens and they eat 24/7. I think I would probably be the same size as them too if I ate 24/7.

The CHAIR: Anna, this is just my curiosity. How old are the chickens when they get processed? And how often do you do that? Is it weekly? Is it monthly? A bit more detail – because I am really interested in the process of how chicken farmers operate their businesses and what they look like.

Anna FEDELE: Okay. On average, we average about 5.7 batches a year. The cycle is approximately 49 days from start to finish. The birds do get depopulated at around 33 to 35 days, so you are looking at every probably four to seven weeks. Then you get like about a week or two in between where there is a break. So at the four-week mark they get depopulated, which means that the small chickens get used for KFC or whatever it is. They take 40 per cent out of the sheds to allow the other birds to increase in growth. Then about 14 days later the whole shed is depopulated, and then we start again about 12 days later than that. So there are 5.7 batches. At the 35-day mark they get thinned out to allow more space for animal welfare, and then they are depopulated again, at around 49 days, completely.

The CHAIR: And this is more from curiosity. You talked about living on the farm and it being a 24/7 job. Is one of the challenges for farmers trying to have a work–life balance? I cannot even imagine how you would have a holiday when you have got such a tight schedule of making sure that the chickens are where they need to be at certain times. How do people do it?

Anna FEDELE: Well, for our farm especially – because we probably have around 71,000 birds at a time, it is classified as a small farm; I know it sounds big, but it is actually not – it is very difficult because while we have livestock on the farm we cannot be more than 10 or 15 minutes away just in case one of the alarms is set off. We need to be back if something happens so the birds do not suffocate and they are all fine. It is actually really difficult for farming. It is 24/7 because you cannot go anywhere basically when you have livestock on the farm. If we have a wedding in the city, we cannot attend. Our turnaround is the time that we clean out the sheds and we sterilise them and do that. It is very difficult to have downtime. This is one of the other issues. As demand gets bigger, our turnover gets quicker. That is why we need more farms to come online: to ease the burden of everyone so everyone can actually get proper time off, for their own mental health really, which is getting harder due to demand for chicken, it being the cheapest meat out there – and delicious.

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Martin CAMERON: Anna, you also spoke about before – I think I heard the number – you have got to be an hour away from the processor. Is that what you said before – for transportation?

Anna FEDELE: Correct. It is basically based on around an hour, an hour and a half, just being an average number, because for them to pick up the live birds and transport them to the plant to get processed – they do not want them to die during transportation, so it has got to be a short time so they can get them safely and efficiently and better for the birds so they do not get stressed out.

Martin CAMERON: That is why it is super important, where you have got your farms, you have got a processing plant that is accessible.

Anna FEDELE: Somerville to Gippsland, Toongabbie or whatever is probably around an hour and 10, which is fine. But if you keep going further than Rosedale – I think Rosedale is probably the last farm outlet.

Martin CAMERON: It is the last one, yes.

Anna FEDELE: That is a superfarm – then you are probably pushing it.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Anna, what makes something a superfarm? What numbers are we talking about for a superfarm?

Anna FEDELE: A million-bird farm. Basically 18 sheds.

Martin CAMERON: They are huge.

Anna FEDELE: They are huge. There are a few of them.

The CHAIR: That is amazing. I am conscious of the time, so I am just going to put to the group: are there any final questions? It has been so interesting learning. I am loving this. Are there any other questions? More importantly, Anna, is there anything else that you feel that our inquiry would really benefit from that we may not have an understanding of, or is there anything else in terms of the future of the industry, in terms of securing Victoria's food supply? Is there anything else that your members who you represent through the Victorian Chicken Growers' Council or you would like to leave with us so we have a really good understanding?

Anna FEDELE: What I would love it if you could do is implement a law like France did and protect our farmers from complaints. That would unblock the shire. I am just going to go back. For the Mornington shire even one year alone has like 25,000 complaints, and probably half of them are farmers I know. There are a lot of complaints. That is probably one of the things. Also the shires and the councils really understanding industry, why it is required and why it is important for people to expand and grow – whether that is a state thing that you can put in place I am not sure. But to help us grow our industry – any industry, it does not matter whether it is us or potatoes – we need it.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you so much, Anna. We have really appreciated hearing about you and your industry, and we look forward to forwarding you the transcript for you to check and also seeing our final report at the end of the year after we table it in the Parliament. Thank you so much for your time today and to the other Victorian chicken growers that you represent.

Witness withdrew.