

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 26 March 2024

MEMBERS

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David Davis – Deputy Chair

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Bev McArthur

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PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

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WITNESSES

Dr Yvette Pollock (*via videoconference*),

Dr Kate Savage,

Dr Andrew Morris, President, Pig Veterinarians Special Interest Group (*via teleconference*), and

Dr Melanie Latter, National Manager, Policy and Veterinary Science (*via videoconference*), Australian Veterinary Association.

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

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

To kick off, we will get committee members to introduce themselves to witnesses, starting on the screen. I am Georgie Purcell from Northern Victoria.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

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

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

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

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

For the Hansard record, could you all please state your full names and the organisations you are appearing on behalf of. We might start with people on the screen.

Yvette POLLOCK: Yes. I will start. My name is Dr Yvette Pollock, and I am appearing on behalf of the Australian Veterinary Association. I have been in the pig industry for 20 years. I have got a PhD in pigs, and I am on the Australian pig veterinarians committee in the position of immediate past president. Andrew?

Andrew MORRIS: Hi. My name is Andrew Morris. I am the President of the Australian pig veterinarians. I have been a veterinarian since 1998. I have worked intensively in the dairy industry and equine industry and spent the last 15 years in the pig industry.

The CHAIR: Thank you. And then in the room?

Kate SAVAGE: My name is Dr Kate Savage. I am a member of the Australian pig vet association under the AVA. I have been a pig vet for more than 12 years now, and I have obviously a vet degree and a masters in international animal welfare, ethics and law.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you very much. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they are kept to a maximum of around 10–15 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Yvette POLLOCK: Sure. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's inquiry into farmed pig welfare in Victoria. The Australian Veterinary Association, the AVA, is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our members come from all fields within the veterinary profession, including clinical practitioners, government vets and members who work in industry research and teaching. The AVA has a special interest group known as the Australian pig veterinarians group, who have contributed their expertise to this response, and we three are representatives from them.

Pig vets work in a variety of practices as consultants and company veterinarians and in government departments, universities, research institutions and a wide range of commercial companies that produce pigs, feed, pig production products and pharmaceuticals. The AVA also has a special interest group known as Australian veterinarians in animal welfare and ethics, AVAWE, who have contributed to this response. This group has expertise in animal welfare, science and ethics. Veterinarians are paid to look after animals that are owned by people. We take this responsibility to care for these animals very seriously and consider ourselves to be experts in welfare, behaviour, biosecurity and health for these animals. Production veterinarians' daily roles include auditing of processes and systems – so biosecurity, welfare and quality assurance audits – staff training, disease investigation, problem solving production issues and health planning. This means that veterinarians are well positioned to contribute in a meaningful way to a range of topics. The AVA is aware of comments that have been made thus far in the inquiry which entertain the notion of shutting down the pig industry in Victoria, and we would not support this. If the outcome of this inquiry were to be the end of pig farming in Victoria, there will have been no meaningful change to farmed pig welfare. Imported products from other states and from overseas will continue as people continue to want to eat meat. It would just cost more to do so.

These are the Australian Veterinary Association's recommendations for this committee. Number 1, we support the standards and guidelines review process and ensuring the appropriate people are represented around the table, particularly the veterinarians from the industry. We advocate for national harmonised regulations arising from this process as well as applying the same standards to imported product. The AVA supports incremental and sustainable improvements in animal welfare. The welfare improvements necessarily involve added cost to the producer, so changes need to be made in a sustainable manner. Increased costs of production need to be passed on to the consumer for the industry to remain viable. It is not equitable to continue to import products from countries with a lower welfare standard while the local pig industry absorbs increased costs for welfare improvements.

Number 2, we support stunning methods that result in minimal pre-stunning stress through automated handling of groups of pigs, no aversion during stunning and pigs remaining unconscious until death is achieved post stunning. Each of these components of stunning is important, and while CO₂ is not perfect, we support opportunities for improvement of the current CO₂ system while the research into alternative gases and systems continues. One opportunity for improvement is for domestic abattoirs to be brought up to the same standard as export abattoirs, with a responsible person overseeing welfare at the site, whether that is a welfare officer or an on-plant vet.

Number 3, we support environmental enrichment for all pigs. As this area of research is continuously evolving, it would be better not to prescribe detailed requirements in legislation. Instead an outcomes-based approach would be preferable, and it would be most effective for vets to work with their farms to create and implement enrichment plans which are meaningful for the pigs at that farm.

Number 4, we encourage moving away from boar stalls towards pens. While this is unlikely to create problems for individual farms due to the small number for boars housed there, this will create significant investment and a phase-in period for boar studs.

Number 5, we support pain relief for painful conditions and procedures. Ideally the painful procedures would be avoided altogether where there are alternatives, but if not, their pain needs to be minimised through how these procedures are performed, so cauterising versus clippers; when they are performed, because piglet age matters; and pain relief where appropriate. We have limitations on what pain relief products can be used in food

production animals at present, and more research is required to work out how to use what is currently available to produce meaningful pain relief with different procedures. We also have expensive and time-consuming processes for getting new products registered, particularly if the industry is reasonably small, which ours is compared to others, so this will limit innovation unless the government can provide additional support in this space.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to be involved in this hearing and hope to address any questions you may still have.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you very much. I might kick off with questions on this one.

Yvette POLLOCK: Sure.

The CHAIR: Could you please tell us some examples of enrichment that could be given to pigs on farms?

Yvette POLLOCK: Yes. Often what is used is manipulable and routable as one measure. There are things like sow lick blocks that are commercially available to buy that some people use as part of their enrichment plans. There are also chains that pigs enjoy interacting with. There are tubes that you can put on the sides of pens that they knock up and down. There is straw, which is obviously an enrichment as well. There are hessian bags. So you can see there can be quite a list.

The CHAIR: Yes. I guess in your experience, are many pig farmers offering forms of enrichment?

Yvette POLLOCK: It is varied across the industry, so it very much depends on the farm. Some farm managers will have enrichment as something that they are working towards across all stages of pigs; others will be focusing on a particular area. So it is varied. This is where I think there is room. We can have enrichment plans that are created between the vet and the farm where what is currently being provided can be acknowledged and where gaps are still present ideas can be given for how to fill those.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Obviously we know that pigs are incredibly intelligent animals. What are the impacts of not having enrichment?

Yvette POLLOCK: Certainly, as the RSPCA mentioned, there are innate behaviours, particularly nesting behaviour – I would say that is an obvious one – where it creates stress if they cannot perform that behaviour. Kate, did you want to add to this welfare question?

Kate SAVAGE: Probably only that it is quite a difficult thing to assess and measure. We have such variable systems that we are talking about, so everything from free range to pigs housed on straw to pigs indoors. It is difficult then to sort of quantify what the absence of something means or does, I guess. The more we start researching the enrichment, the more we start trialling things on farm and working with our producers: ‘Try this. Okay, that didn’t work. It didn’t last long, the pigs didn’t like it; let’s try something else.’ The more we do that, I think the further we go and the more we learn.

The CHAIR: You also mentioned that you think CO₂ stunning can be improved. Can you please tell us how?

Yvette POLLOCK: If you think about those three aspects, one is – and I think the RSPCA mentioned this as well – around the group handling of pigs. There are two different types of systems that are used. You have the back loading, where there is a group of pigs that go into the stunning box together, versus side loading, where you will have two pigs going together, but one by one, up the race. So doing a group is a better way of handling the animals. Melanie, did you have your hand up?

Melanie LATTER: Yes, but I will wait until you are finished. I was just going to add something on CO₂.

Yvette POLLOCK: Yes. No, go ahead.

Melanie LATTER: Okay. One of the other things that we are interested in seeing more research into and development of is the use of alternatives to CO₂ such as inert gases. There is science that shows that combining inert gases with CO₂ or pure inert gas can be more humane because it causes a loss of consciousness without the high CO₂ in the bloodstream which causes that sensation of panic and air hunger that they talk about. At the

moment it is not something we can immediately implement. There is certain research being done, there is some use of it overseas and we would like to see alternatives developed in due course to CO₂.

Yvette POLLOCK: And this is where we are looking to the EU PigStun project and all that is happening in that space already.

The CHAIR: On that, you would not say that CO₂ stunning is pain-free then.

Melanie LATTER: No. It is well recognised to be aversive. The milder thing is that it is an irritant to mucous membranes. But in fact with CO₂ – by its very nature, because when carbon dioxide rises in the bloodstream of any mammal the reaction is to increase its breathing drive because, obviously, everything wants to protect itself against suffocation – if your bloodstream CO₂ goes up, it is inherently aversive because you cannot breathe.

The reason that there are other gases being looked at – when we talk about inert gases, we mean things like nitrogen and argon – is that when they rise in your bloodstream, they replace oxygen. You lose consciousness without the CO₂ rising, so there is not that same air hunger or anxious feeling of breathlessness that occurs with CO₂. So that is where all that research is headed, towards really gentle loss of consciousness without panic and air hunger.

The CHAIR: You would not agree with some of the comments we have heard that they gently go to sleep.

Melanie LATTER: No.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. I think Andrew had his hand up.

Andrew MORRIS: I just think it is really important that we follow a proper, repeatable, scientific process to develop any other alternatives, because rushing into anything can cause a lot of unintended consequences. Once systems are adopted, they are adopted for medium- and long-term outcomes, so while I do not think there is any argument that we should be looking to newer and better systems, we just have to make sure we are following the evidence as opposed to maybe a knee-jerk or impulsive move.

Melanie LATTER: We are very much science-based, but I think there is good science. There has been a lot of research happening for a long time. That PigStun project is certainly working on scientific principles, and I think it is being done methodically and rigorously. That is the sort of stuff we want. Obviously, yes, we do not want to just introduce something on a whim, but I think there is good science behind this and it is the way of the future, with hope.

The CHAIR: I agree. Thank you. Just finally, we heard from some farmers that handling pigs to provide them pain relief before routine procedures such as tail docking or teeth clipping would be too stressful for them and that it is better to handle them only once to do the procedure without pain relief instead of twice for the injection and then the procedure. Notwithstanding that we know there is more research to be done on what pain relief can be used for animals in food systems, do you agree with these comments that it would be more stressful than a surgery without pain relief?

Yvette POLLOCK: I think the double-handling aspect is always a consideration, because it is stressful to handle pigs, so we do have to take that into account. That does not mean that you do not provide the pain relief; it just means that you think about how it can be done. I think Andrew wants to add to that. He has got his hand up.

Andrew MORRIS: Yes. The picking up of piglets has to be considered as some sort of stressor, but also the delivery of an injection is by definition not exactly nothing. Also, as Yvette mentioned in her opening statement, the age of the animal is quite significant with respect to understanding their pain perception. So, yes, handling the animal is not a nothing, and yes, it should be considered as something that has got to be considered.

The CHAIR: Did you have anything to add to that, Melanie?

Melanie LATTER: Yes. I would just say that the AVA policy on painful husbandry procedures is that analgesia must be used where it is available, so we are very keen to see the work being done into analgesics for

pigs. I also think we look at things that are aversive in terms of ‘Can we replace them, and can we substitute an alternate management practice, for instance, for that husbandry procedure?’ The immunocastration, for instance, in pigs is good progress against surgical castration. Can we refine them if we cannot replace them? Refinement is use of analgesics and good handling and, as Yvette said, doing things at the appropriate age with the right techniques – all of those sorts of things. Analgesia is one of those refinements that is an important move if we cannot move away from the painful husbandry procedure itself and find an alternative.

Andrew MORRIS: If there is anything that could be suggested here, it would be lowering the barrier of entry to any sort of innovative products in Australia. At the moment we have a very, dare I say it, clunky registration system for quite a small market, and most of the pharmaceutical companies will really balk at going through the cost of entry into our market for such a small market.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you very much for that. That is my time. I will hand over to Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. I have just got a couple of quick questions. Thank you, everybody, for your participation today. I recognise the wealth of experience that is across this group. I am just wondering in terms of the global presence where Victoria might fit in all of that. Are we up with the standards, given there is a fair bit of science around all of this? Where do we sit with it all?

Andrew MORRIS: I would say you stand fairly highly, depending upon how you measure such things. From my experience around the world Victoria, and by extension the rest of Australia, has very high welfare standards that are adopted willingly. Therefore it is not just a facade. They are very substantial, the welfare practices that go on behind the scenes.

John BERGER: So it actually translates into practice rather than lip-service?

Andrew MORRIS: Yes, I would say that.

John BERGER: Okay. There was mention of a stun project. Can someone elaborate as to what that all means?

Yvette POLLOCK: Sorry, did you say the EU stun project?

John BERGER: Yes.

Yvette POLLOCK: Kate, do you have that handy? Because I can bring up what they –

Kate SAVAGE: No, I do not think that I have it in front of me. I know it is quite a long-term project. They have got quite a few different research bodies involved. I do not want to give you investment figures off the top of my head, though, because I would only be estimating those. But yes, it is a long-term project, as Melanie said, looking at the alternate gases and the viability of those. There are issues with supply and amount of some of them. They are quite scarce, like argon. Is a blend or a combination of gases a better way to go et cetera? My understanding of the project is to look at retrofitting the existing CO₂ systems, rather than overhauling them, as a more realistic approach that would be achievable quicker than sort of saying everything needs to be completely replaced with something quite radical.

John BERGER: Is there any suggestion on how long this project will last, or is there a date in mind or a time frame in mind that it might come to some conclusion?

Yvette POLLOCK: It is currently underway. I do not have an end date. Another thing that they are also looking at is electrical stunning, improving that process. And I do not have it off the top of my head, but there are other components too. We can certainly provide you with more information on that.

John BERGER: Well, that might be useful.

Yvette POLLOCK: Absolutely.

John BERGER: If there is some scientific evidence that supports alternative methods that are currently in place now that might be more user friendly, I think that would be appreciated for us to understand. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, Mr Berger. We will go to Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much, and thank you to each of you for coming and presenting today and for your submission. I am just interested – how do you support pig farmers to improve animal welfare outcomes on a practical level?

Yvette POLLOCK: That is a part – sorry, did you want to go, Andrew?

Andrew MORRIS: I was going to start with: how long have you got?

Gaelle BROAD: You have been in it for 15 years, so keen to hear from you.

Yvette POLLOCK: It is everything we do, yes. You go, Andrew.

Andrew MORRIS: Look, fundamentally education is a big part of it, and a part of that education process sometimes is to accept what is already there and work in incremental, achievable steps so that people can see the benefit of something directly that they do and achieve it. Some people may not be particularly well educated, so we have to bear that in mind as we progress them towards things that they can see, that they can achieve, that they can hear about their neighbours, their friends and their colleagues doing, and that it actually is going to be all right if they make a certain change. I know that is a very untechnical answer, but the psychology of it is at least as important as the technical details.

Gaelle BROAD: Did others want to add to that?

Yvette POLLOCK: I would say that, just to add to what Andrew said, kind of everything that we do is around education, trying to improve welfare with individual animals – their treatment plans, early decisions on euthanasia or how well they are progressing with treatment, so education around all of those elements. We also get involved in internal auditing, so we will do that in between the external audits that get done by the third party for the APIQ program. Often vets will get involved with internal auditing of their own farms. They are the ones that spring to mind. Kate, did you want to add any?

Kate SAVAGE: Yes, only that some producers will have their own in-company welfare monitoring programs and schemes, so quite often we will assist with those sorts of initiatives as well in whatever way we can, basically, and work with producers a lot around the science to just improve those standards on a constant basis.

Yvette POLLOCK: That is good, Kate, because that has reminded me: we also do welfare audits, and I am sure all vets will have a version of that that they do as part of their vet visit, but we do a separate welfare audit as well.

Gaelle BROAD: Now, I do note that each of you has got ‘Dr’ in front of your name, so we certainly respect that. I am just interested in your continuous education in the industry. How do you keep abreast of the changes?

Yvette POLLOCK: There are lots of elements to that. We have an annual conference for the Australian pig vets, and that is usually very well attended by all the various companies and consultancy groups. We always have up-to-date case studies for diseases, because of course that is another part of our jobs, but also welfare as well features within that. We also have continuous professional development that we have to do as part of our registration, so that is another thing to note. Even though we willingly do it all the time anyway, because we are always trying to make sure that we are top of our game, I suppose, there is also a requirement that there is a certain level of structured and unstructured professional development that occurs. Kate and Andrew, did you want to add to that?

Kate SAVAGE: Probably just to add the international factor. You can imagine there are not a whole lot of pig vets in Australia. We know each other very well in the industry, so there is an element of networking. If we do not have the answer in front of us, I am quite happy to reach out to other vets from other companies or from the other side of the country – to me it does not really matter – and to work with even international vets as well in that respect. Sometimes we have not seen something before, so it is a good outcome if you can reach out to a vet that you have met at an international conference six months ago or a year ago and sort of say, ‘Oh, hey, you mentioned that you had X, Y and Z, and now I am dealing with the same thing.’ There is definitely formal education, and there are international conferences, domestic conferences, a lot of reading and self-education

and that sort of thing, and then there are all of these networks and connections. Now that I have been in the industry 12-plus years it is great to draw on those to get that other opinion from other more experienced vets.

Andrew MORRIS: Yes. I would say that there is also the formal aspect of things like the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists. That has a training and assessment course. We have got a plethora of information that comes in via subscribable media sources. Many of us have a network of international colleagues, and as Kate mentioned, we are fairly small group, so there is a lot of networking in between us and the sharing of those skills, knowledge, international contacts et cetera, et cetera.

Melanie LATTER: I was just going to add one thing there that you might have forgotten to mention. It is a small group of pig vets, but quite a few of them are actually actively involved in the research into new initiatives and things like that too.

Yvette POLLOCK: Yes, thanks, Melanie. We are all involved in research to some degree, so there will be either on-farm research, which is always happening as part of that, or we will actually be involved in official research projects as well. Thanks, Melanie. Good reminder.

Gaëlle BROAD: So when you are looking at that international research, how do you integrate that here in Victoria? Is it compatible with what is happening overseas, or is Victoria different for any reason?

Yvette POLLOCK: Probably the thing to say there – say, an example – would be when the voluntary phase out was just beginning. That was an opportunity where we did not know anything about group housing sows, and so we drew upon international experience. We had people come out to our conferences, and we tried to educate people on what was currently known and what people were finding was working. You then have to apply that knowledge to your individual farms, which are all different, and then you have to muddle through and try to make it work on that particular farm. So there are always differences between international and domestic, because we have different climates, we have got different infrastructure, different resources available – all sorts of things. But then there are always differences between farms as well, and so that is where we have to use that expertise. Did anyone want to add to that? Andrew or Kate?

Kate SAVAGE: Probably only to mention in my experience the biggest difference in the resources that Yvette mentioned is labour. Quite often you will see a fantastic idea from overseas and you are all gung-ho to implement it, but when you look at how many hours it would take for stock people to implement, the difference becomes very apparent that in that overseas country their labour is not paid as well as they are here and things like that. So yes, when we talking about resources, it is all the way down to the staff on farm.

Andrew MORRIS: Look, access to capital makes a big difference too there. Some of our international competitors, compatriots, colleagues have marketplaces that are much friendlier to agriculture perhaps than Australia is, and therefore in those countries they have more capital to be able to spend on improvements and they also have a lot more capital to spend on risky improvements that may or may not work, whereas I would say that in Australia we are fairly constrained in that respect. If you make a change, it must work, because there are not a lot of second chances.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad, one more question.

Gaëlle BROAD: That is fine. Thank you, Chair. Andrew, I was interested just in what you mentioned there about other countries perhaps being a bit more friendly towards agriculture. Can you expand on that?

Andrew MORRIS: I am not sure that I should – it goes way beyond the scope of this inquiry – but our ability to market our product is constrained. We are competing with lots of imports and we essentially have a very controlled marketplace into which to sell, and that goes beyond the pig industry. But yes, I think to go much further would get away from the point of this discussion.

Gaëlle BROAD: That is fine. It does say ‘any other relevant matters’, so you have got a bit of licence, Andrew. That is fine.

Andrew MORRIS: In which case I would just like to say that if we could be competing on a level playing field from the perspective of animal welfare, our industry in Australia would be much stronger, but the reality is

that we are competing with people who have much lower welfare expectations placed on their farming systems than we do. As a result it is difficult to compete.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you, Andrew.

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

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everyone. Andrew, I was interested and encouraged actually to learn that you think science should determine improved outcomes as opposed to, in your words, kneejerk responses. I would add ideology. What are the consequences of science being ignored by government in favour of kneejerk or ideological responses to animal welfare?

Andrew MORRIS: Bad decisions and poor outcomes. I would qualify that statement by saying that when people talk about the science they seem to talk about some mystical all-encompassing body of knowledge, when in actual fact science by its definition has to be repeatable. If we see things that look promising, it must be repeatable in order for it to be truly beneficial. But yes, I think the short answer to your question would be: bad decisions.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Andrew. Now this is for anybody. I asked the RSPCA what registered pain relief options are currently available in Australia, as everybody talks about pigs needing pain relief. Can you tell us: are there any? Are they being developed? Or is this a furphy?

Yvette POLLOCK: Yes, there are pain relief products available that we use on farms for painful conditions, so lameness. Some people use them for sows and gilts during farrowing. We do have pain relief products that are available. They are not really registered for piglets, so this is where we enter that thing where sometimes it is 1 ml per 50 kilograms. When you are talking about a 1-kilo piglet you are talking about a very tiny amount of product, and our ability to actually deliver that amount accurately without accidentally overdosing the animal does become an issue. When we still talking about registering products and having alternatives, this is one important part of that. We do recognise giving these products to piglets does require some thought on how we are actually going to do that safely.

Andrew MORRIS: It has to be recognised too that neonates have a subtly different physiology to more mature animals. That has to be taken into account as well.

Bev McARTHUR: Currently you would not be in a position to give pain relief to a 1-kilogram piglet. Is that what you are saying?

Yvette POLLOCK: We could, but a great deal of thought would have to go into how we do it. That is more the thing.

Bev McARTHUR: We also hear a lot about biosecurity on farms. How important is biosecurity?

Yvette POLLOCK: Biosecurity is really critical. I would say that we are certainly the experts on biosecurity, so we can answer all your questions about how people get in and out of farms. I suppose one of the things is that these are not protocols that you can just guess. You cannot just assume what they are when you arrive at the farm, and there is a process for if you are going to visit a farm. There is a pre-visit questionnaire that people will take you through to work out what your risk level is. That will be around what pig exposure you have had if any. It will be around whether you are vaccinated against influenza. It will be around where your vehicle has been, where your boots have been, whether you have been overseas. All of those things come into this risk assessment. Then if you pass that and you are able to enter the farm, we have high-health farms where you have to shower in and shower out and you are wearing the boots and the clothing for the farm, sometimes down to the underwear, depending on the site. Andrew, I think you have got your hand up to add to this.

Andrew MORRIS: Yes. Look, I was just going to say if you want to understand the impact of a really open look at biosecurity, you could take a look at China during the African swine fever outbreak and look at the terrible welfare implications that that had across an entire nation. Now, that is what comes from not understanding in many cases the principles behind biosecurity. That is one of the risks we take when we do not

have an opportunity to do the pre-screening protocols that Yvette is talking about, because there are lots of things that do not spring to mind to someone who is not familiar with the diseases or the livestock.

Bev McARTHUR: Andrew, would you say then that people illegally entering premises, whether they be farms or slaughterhouses, are putting at risk the animal welfare aspects of the industry, let alone the future of it?

Andrew MORRIS: Yes. Absolutely. I think that that is one of our worst nightmares. Unauthorised entry into any system is one of the principal things that you must stop in order to gain any sense of assurance over what happens within that. Be it animal health, be it animal welfare, if people are on our farms and we do not know, goodness only knows what is going on, and we have no assurance that the right things are being done.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you share any examples of innovative practices or technologies that have been adopted in the pig industry to enhance animal welfare with the support of veterinary science?

Yvette POLLOCK: Kate, do you want to take that one?

Kate SAVAGE: Yes. I think if we look back over the improvements to the whole industry – it depends how far you want to go back – Yvette already mentioned we were a big part of that industry voluntary phase-out of sow stalls and bringing that science to the producers. Another major change that I think has had a huge impact on animal welfare is the move away from surgical castration to the use of immunocastration, which is actually – correct me if I am wrong, Yvette – an Australian invention that we have widely used on farms now to the point where the vast majority of producers do not surgically castrate. That product actually prevents the riding by male pigs of other pigs, and with that there were issues with lameness, as in injuries et cetera. So not only have you got the benefits of not having the castration procedure but you have actually got benefits later on for the pig's life as well. So you know, the vast majority of industry taking up that product I think has been quite a significant welfare change. Yvette is probably better to give you the time line of how many years that was over. She has been in the industry slightly longer than I have.

Yvette POLLOCK: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Your submission also highlights the role of artificial insemination in reducing the need for boar presence on farms and minimising disease transmission through less movement of live breeding pigs. Could you tell us further how these practices have contributed to good overall animal health and biosecurity outcomes in the Victorian pig industry?

Yvette POLLOCK: Did you want to go with that one, Andrew?

Andrew MORRIS: Yes. Well, essentially the propagation of genetics around the country is best done by moving males around fundamentally, because less of them are required. Now, by replacing moving the live animal with the moving of semen around we can disperse genetics across the nation without dispersing the concurrent disease risks that come with transporting a live animal. That is it in a nutshell. Also of course any sort of sexually transmitted disease is halted at the pass, because there is no direct – most diseases are spread by the actual physical contact of the physical body part, so you cut off a lot of sexually transmitted illnesses that could pass by artificially inseminating.

Bev McARTHUR: Great. Could your association elaborate on the impact of transitioning away from gestation stalls and the investment required by farmers in terms of infrastructure, shed design and research into alternative housing methods? There is obviously a cost involved here.

Yvette POLLOCK: There is quite a bit of cost. We could each talk about our own stories here. You go, Andrew.

Andrew MORRIS: It is very significant. It has to be considered not just as a one-off cost. There are also a lot of people in the early days who did it wrong and therefore had to invest twice. It is not as simple as putting up a new shed fitted out with the appropriate facilities to avoid the social stressors around feeding and the socialising of groups of animals. That is one thing, but if you happened to pick the wrong line to invest down, then some people had to do it twice, so there was a cost and also an uncertainty factor that came in with it. We have a lot to learn. You think it is a black-and-white choice – living in groups must be better than living in stalls. There was a lot to learn about managing the social dynamics of groups of animals that collectively we

learned over that five-year period between, say, 2009 and 2014–15. Veterinarians are in a pretty unique place – we are at the coalface, so to speak. We are seeing lots of things that work; we are also seeing some things that do not work. I think that cost has to play into the fact that there is also uncertainty and the risk of having to do it twice.

Bev McARTHUR: One last question, Chair?

The CHAIR: Final question, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: We did hear from a free-range pig producer that there are implications for free-range pig production in that they can pick up other diseases spread by perhaps birds or other animals in this situation. What are the pros and cons of free-range pig production compared to the more intensive forms of pig production?

Kate SAVAGE: I might take that one, because I think Andrew and Yvette do not – correct me if I am wrong – have current experience with free range, whereas in my business we do. Free-range production, I guess like any type of business, has its pros and cons. You do require obviously a large expanse of land. It has to be affordable land, as in not too close to people et cetera. It also then has to have the correct soil type so that you can manage nutrient deposition et cetera. It has to be in the right climate for the pigs – obviously they do not like hot weather et cetera. It is not something that we can just set up on every corner in every part of Australia. The sites have to be licensed by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action in Victoria, and then usually there are council regulations and things as well. There have been some recent attempts in Victoria for producers to open free-range farms but they have actually been postponed or delayed at that council level.

From a producer point of view, they do take a bit of hit at times, because it is a less efficient way of producing the pigs. If you feed the two types of pigs a kilogram of feed, the free-range farm pigs have to put a lot more energy into staying thermally comfortable. They have to put more energy into staying cool or staying warm rather than growing. You have then got the increased losses in the farrowing huts, with overlays and things like that. It is not as productive, which is fine – that is okay – but then the real kicker comes when the producers do not necessarily get paid the premium that they should for producing in that way. We have seen a situation before where it has ended up actually not economically viable to remain as a free-range producer or to enter as a free-range producer, which is a bit of a shame really. They might be some of the pros and cons that we are talking about.

From a vet point of view, free-range production makes biosecurity a little bit more tricky. We were just talking about how important it is for the pigs. In that free-range setting you have got the pigs, the straw, their bedding, their wallows, their feed and their water all sort of exposed to wild birds. Birds can carry things like avian influenza. They can carry salmonella. We have just got that risk that we cannot quite control like we would indoors. Also, it is harder to control the rodents, and they carry swine dysentery. There is a biosecurity risk that comes with that type of production. Obviously, as vets we would work with all types of producers. It is just about getting to the best possible standard with whatever production type they have decided to use. We just do our best in those situations.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. We also learned that some piglets are lost through foxes taking them and so on.

Kate SAVAGE: Yes, so the idea with free range is to relocate the farm regularly so that you do not have issues with soil degradation or nutrient deposition et cetera, which means you cannot make permanent structures. The whole farm needs to be movable, and so then fencing becomes difficult. You know, you would love to put up great fox fences and keep everybody completely protected – you can sometimes do that – but when they do, it is obviously a huge investment, and sometimes they will have to repeat it when the site moves, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay, thank you. That is probably me, is it, Chair?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs McArthur. Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thank you for your presentation and the submission that you have made to the inquiry. I am interested, and I think you just touched on it in your answer there, Dr Savage – there was a comment in your submission I think about best practice in other countries not necessarily being the same in

Australia, mainly due to climactic considerations, and I just wondered if you could elaborate a little on what that means in terms of a welfare context in Australia and Victoria specifically.

Kate SAVAGE: Sure.

Katherine COPSEY: What climate elements do we need to consider in maximising animal welfare?

Kate SAVAGE: Yes, so we cannot necessarily translate findings from overseas here, specifically around things like building design and, as I said, free-range production, as in where we are going to place it. We cannot just sort of use the same farrowing hut design that they would have in the UK. They are trying to keep their sows warm; free range we want to try to keep ourselves cool. Transport as well, so things like truck design. We cannot sort of just import Canadian trucks that have a great welfare design, because again they are trying to do the opposite of what we are trying to do with cooling versus warming. So a lot of the climactic concern comes around accommodation, transport, that sort of thing. Unless you wanted to add anything, Yvette?

Yvette POLLOCK: No, that is good.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thanks for elaborating on that; it gives me a good understanding. I am interested in the recommendation you made around having a vet or animal welfare officer onsite at each facility. That is not common practice currently, is it?

Kate SAVAGE: You are speaking of abattoirs?

Katherine COPSEY: Processing facilities, yes.

Yvette POLLOCK: Melanie might want to answer this, but for export abattoirs, there is an on-plant vet. For domestic, it is not a requirement. That is right, isn't it, Melanie?

Melanie LATTER: Yes, that is right. And I guess – and I personally did a fair bit of work in the past in abattoirs and in stunning research – some of our experience was that animals turning up at domestic abattoirs may not be in the best state or there might not be someone there to inspect them or intervene and take that sort of emergency response to euthanise or treat animals. We have observed that having a veterinarian at an export abattoir or a dedicated animal welfare officer we feel does tend to raise the standards of animal welfare oversight, and we recommend that that is also in place at domestic abattoirs.

Katherine COPSEY: And just so I can understand the recommendation, would that person be an independent observer? What is your thinking in relation to that?

Andrew MORRIS: Well, I would like to step in there and say that as a condition of veterinary registration anywhere in Australia, you are expected to comply to certain standards, regardless of who pays your wage. While realities are one thing, at least in principle a veterinarian employed by an abattoir – I would like to think they would make the same decisions and the same recommendations as one that is employed by a third party.

Melanie LATTER: And the other thing that we, AVA, advocates is CCTV in abattoirs for transparency, and it goes back to the question earlier about people entering facilities illegally. If there is better transparency and the community has confidence from things like CCTV and knowing that there are regular welfare audits and that it is all done in a transparent and reportable way, that can help reduce that sort of activity of people feeling like, 'Well, we don't know what's going on; we have to go in there and film it covertly.' So all of those things would assist in sort of addressing some of those issues.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Yes, we heard from some producers about their existing practice in using existing CCTV to have eyes on elements of their production, so that does make a lot of sense. In relation to the visits that you conduct, the audits that you conduct, can I understand: those are the third-party audits that the committee has heard referenced?

Kate SAVAGE: With the third-party audits, there are a couple of audits a year. One is by an independent auditor – independent to the industry, independent to the farm et cetera. The other audit is an internal audit. Those are the ones that can be done by the farm vets. Some vets will do it for non-clients as well, so they will just do it because they are based in that region, for example. So we have nothing to do with farm, we just know the people and will go and do the internal audit.

Katherine COPSEY: I am still getting that straight in my head, which audits you conducted.

Kate SAVAGE: Then some producers will go step further and they will do a third – so they might do an independent audit themselves, get a vet to do an independent audit and then they will have the external audit by the third party. So they will do three in the space of a year.

Katherine COPSEY: And those audits are scheduled, not unannounced – the internal audits?

Kate SAVAGE: It depends on the vet, it depends on the farm. In my experience I have had producers ask me to make them unannounced, but I have also had producers schedule them. It sort of depends from farm to farm.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. That is interesting. Do you find, just in your personal opinions, that it is good to have unannounced audits? Do you think that they are more likely to pick up issues?

Kate SAVAGE: We tried it for a while, and to be honest, without being too specific, there was a reason why we were requested to do that. They thought it would be, ‘Oh, yeah, let’s really see what’s happening.’ But to be honest, what was happening was what was happening on all the other days that we went anyway. In my experience welfare concerns cannot really just be magically made to disappear because you tell them the day before that you are coming the next day, if that makes sense. We are trained quite well, and we have got a lot of experience here. It is very difficult to pull the rug over our eyes if you are trying to hide something, if you know what I mean. I do not see that really happening. I do not have any issue with sort of coming unannounced or announced. The only issue with unannounced visits is that farm staff are quite busy. and they do not want to go away from their tasks and looking after the animals to then try to slot in time to spend with me doing an internal audit. It is a very thorough process, the audit; it takes a lot of time. You walk the entire farm, so obviously having a staff member with you is quite a time investment. They tend to be a bit of a pain in the bum if you just rock up.

Yvette POLLOCK: I would add, Kate, and just say that if you were just doing a welfare audit, then you could probably do that unannounced, but there are a lot of standards in the quality assurance scheme, and it is very time-consuming. They have to make themselves available. Andrew has got his hand up to add.

Andrew MORRIS: The mere fact that there is a significant body of the industry that pays people to go and do non-compulsory audits is, in many ways, something I have always seen as a vote of confidence, that these guys actually care. There is no reporting of what we find on an internal audit or a snap welfare audit or a ‘Here, just go and see if you can catch these guys doing something’ audit. The mere fact that those exist is a bit of an indication of how seriously people take the actual reality of what is behind the facade matching the facade. I think Kate is right: (a) you cannot really hide something on 24 hours notice, because some of us can see it anyway, but secondly, I am just not sure that there are that many of them.

Katherine COPSEY: In my remaining time there was just one other question I had which was about something quite specific to your evidence. I am looking at existing practices that are available as an alternative to surgical procedures without pain relief. You have spoken a little bit about how some of those procedures are due to density of animals and you are trying to balance different welfare outcomes, but the one we have not heard about from other witnesses is the immunocastration procedure versus what I presume the alternative would be, a surgical castration procedure. Can you just tell me a little bit about those alternatives and whether that is an immediately available alternative as opposed to some of the stuff around CO₂, which seems to be evolving?

Kate SAVAGE: Do you want to take that, Yvette?

Yvette POLLOCK: The Improvac is the vaccine that is available, a vaccine against GnRH, and that is widely used in male pigs instead of surgical castration. I do not have any sites myself that use surgical castration. I do not know if Kate or Andrew have any that they want to speak to.

Kate SAVAGE: No.

Andrew MORRIS: Well, yes, we have done some surgical castration programs, or I have overseen some surgical castration programs. Also, there are plenty of immunocastration ones. Yes, it is immediately available;

you can walk out and buy it on prescription right now, as long as your veterinarian prescribes it to you. It is a restricted prescription animal remedy, but it is available as we speak. Certain pharmaceutical companies would love you if you – there are certainly big pharmaceutical interests at stake if something like that was to be added to any sort of regulation or legislation.

Katherine COPSEY: I am just trying to understand – I know we are at time, Chair, but I have just got one very short clarifying question. As the alternative, what age are the pigs, commonly, when a surgical castration is undertaken, and is that done with anaesthetic? I am not sure of the numbers of pigs and that sort of thing, so what is the common practice with surgical, if that makes sense?

Andrew MORRIS: It is done when they are tiny babies. Always less than seven days. It would be very commonly done less than three days, when the pigs are very, very small. In my experience, people who were doing it were using pain relief to do it, from that limited pool of pain relief alternatives.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Melanie, did you want to quickly add something?

Melanie LATTER: Yes. I just want to say that we know that surgical castration at any age is painful. There used to be a school of thought for many years with husbandry procedures that younger animals could not feel pain the way older animals could, but that has been disproven, so we know that it is painful at any age. It is not just the acute pain but there is also extended duration of pain after any sort of cut or physical intervention like that. So the immunocastration certainly is an absolute positive for animal welfare because it is just a vaccination. It is a huge innovation, and it is, as Kate said, a great Australian development.

Katherine COPSEY: Great. Thank you. I appreciate that.

The CHAIR: That takes us to time, but we really appreciate you appearing before us today and for your contribution. That concludes the public hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.