T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Melbourne—Monday, 23 September 2019

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WITNESS

Professor Paul Hemsworth, Animal Welfare Science Centre, University of Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and welcome to everybody. The Committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture, and the evidence is being recorded.

Welcome to the public hearings of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Everyone in the gallery, please make sure your phone is on silent. No photos are allowed to be taken unless you are from the media.

Before you start, Professor, please state your name for the Hansard record.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Paul Hamilton Hemsworth.

The CHAIR: Are you going to tell us something or should we go straight to questions?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: I am happy to tell you something, but I am very pleased to answer questions.

The CHAIR: Can you tell us a bit more about your research and things like that, please?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Right, okay. My research interests originally were animal behaviour and physiology. I did a PhD at the University of Melbourne. I did a postdoc at Utrecht University. I have had sabbaticals at the University of California, Davis, and the University of Illinois. I was originally employed by that Department of Agriculture here in Victoria. I moved to the University of Melbourne in 1997. I established the Animal Welfare Science Centre, which was a joint centre of the University of Melbourne; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, I think it was called, at that time in Victoria; Monash University; and Ohio State University. I was director for 20 years. I just stepped back from that position. I am still very active in animal welfare research.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Professor, do you think laws in Victoria could be improved to better enable the protection of the welfare of animals?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: It is a difficult question. Can I come back to that a little bit?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: I have spent most of my research life studying the impact of housing systems and the impact of animal handlers or stock people. That research and research by many others indicates that, irrespective of the housing system, it is probably the design of the system as well as the management of that system—the person that is actually managing those animals—and I think that is absolutely critical to animal welfare. Laws, standards and guidelines are important in terms of providing information on the basic physical or resource inputs that are necessary, like space and group size et cetera, but at the end of the day it is the design of the system and the person that is managing those animals that is so critical to animal welfare.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Joining us is Mr Andy Meddick just now. He is a member of the Committee.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thanks, Professor, for coming along today and giving your evidence. Do you think that Victorian farm animals are adequately protected under state animal welfare laws?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: As I said, I think they contribute to safeguarding animal welfare. I think we will see ongoing improvements in the manner in which we manage our animals through research and development and through the education and training of stock people. I think the laws that we have in Australia or in Victoria—the laws and the code of practice, for example, or standards and guidelines that have been developed nationally

to this point in time—provide similar protection to what we see in some of the main farm animal countries, particularly in the western countries.

The CHAIR: Mr Tim Quilty just joined us as well. He is a member of the committee.

Mr FINN: Professor, thank you for joining us this afternoon. Obviously this is a matter of great interest across the board and from various sides of the debate. Would it be your view that farmers have a vested interest, if you like, in ensuring that their animals are well looked after?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Yes. I mean, if welfare is seriously at risk, then there are likely to be productivity implications—efficiency of production. We know in situations where we chronically stress animals, for example, we generally see adverse effects on efficiency of production, whether it is breeding performance in sows or whether it is egg production in laying hens et cetera. So animal welfare and productivity go hand in hand, particularly in terms of where welfare is seriously at risk.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you very much, Professor, for coming here today. You have also been asked, I think, to consider the risks to welfare from activists disturbing or removing livestock. Given that you are a student of animal psychology or behavioural activities, what are those risks if people who are not familiar with the animals enter farming properties? What happens to their behaviour?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: I mean, it depends on how the individuals enter the farm. In some situations they may create startling and fear responses. For example, one of our major studies at the moment is looking at smothering in free-range laying hens. Smothering accounts for about half of the mortality in free-range laying hens in Australia—30 to 40 per cent actually in some farms. It is a developing problem. Mortalities are already high in free-range systems compared to some of the indoor systems, and one of the factors that is affecting startling responses and smothering in laying hens is novelty—unfamiliarity. And in some of our work at the moment we are seeing up to 200 laying hens dying in often a startling event.

Mrs McARTHUR: So just to explore that a little further, Professor, you are saying that free-range hens are perhaps at a disadvantage compared to caged hens?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Well, if the individuals enter at night, for example, that will probably be an unusual situation. If they enter in large numbers, that will also be an unusual situation that may create startling responses, for example. Farm animals get used to the environment in which they live, and any changes in that environment potentially can affect startling and fear responses.

Mr FINN: It would be safe to say, Chair, that the old saying of, 'Don't frighten the chooks', is probably a very good one.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Yes, or humans or any other animal.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Professor. It seems to be, from what you are saying, that your research, your field of expertise, is around systems and what is good and what produces good outcomes and what does not produce good outcomes. I have a few questions there. In intensive animal agriculture—so, for instance, animals that are brought up wholly and solely in feedlot situations in massive barns of caged hens that hold tens of thousands of animals in confinement for their entire lives—would that generally bring about poor animal welfare and animal health outcomes?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: No. I do not think there is anything inherently wrong with intensive animal production. At the end of the day, as I said before, I think it is more about the design of the system that they are in and how well they are managed.

Mr MEDDICK: And the pressures of market forces that modern farmers find themselves under, would they potentially force shortcuts to assist them and then also bring about poor outcomes?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: That is not my impression. I mean, I together with some of my colleagues have studied farmers, stock people and their animals in probably several hundred farms around the world, and my

impression is that stock people and farmers generally enjoy the job. They have substantial challenges at times, but they genuinely enjoy working with their animals so—

Mr MEDDICK: Yes, but that is not the question there. In many, many other fields, all fields—and the scientific field and research is not immune to this—where people are placed under pressure, no matter what their field of expertise, it generally can force the behavioural action among people to take shortcuts. Is animal agriculture immune to that—

Prof. HEMSWORTH: No.

Mr MEDDICK: or is that something that could potentially be there?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: I think whether the system is intensive or extensive, those pressures exist on farmers. And the term 'intensive', I mean, most of our free-range systems these days are intensive—free-range laying hens with 40 000 to 48 000 birds in a flock, and there may be several flocks. I mean, I have no problems with intensive or extensive systems. I have no problems within indoors versus outdoors. I think the main challenge in relation to animal welfare is design and the management of that system. Now, those pressures that you are talking about, I mean, I am not that familiar with those pressures. You probably need to be a farmer, but I would have thought that they apply to animal agriculture in general and maybe other industries.

Mr MEDDICK: And just one other question—sorry, Chair—on the smothering: you are saying that that in these free-range flocks amounts to up to 40 per cent.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: We are seeing 30 to 40 per cent in some Australian farms around Australia.

Mr MEDDICK: Regardless of whether there is a person who would not normally be there or not.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: No.

Mr BARTON: We have heard a lot of discussion about transparency in the marketplace on farms and those things. The department of ag is responsible for the animal welfare and also for promoting and developing the ag industry here in Victoria. Do you think there is a benefit in animal health—animal welfare—being broken away and separated from the department of ag itself so there is a separate body that does not actually answer to the department of ag?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: A good question. There may be some advantages. There may be some disadvantages too. There may be some advantage in terms of independence. One of the advantages, though, I suppose, of the department of ag is that they know the industries very well—so particularly in terms of farm animal welfare. But look, I think there may be advantages and disadvantages. I have not really thought about that in much detail.

Mr GEPP: Professor, thanks for coming along today. I have just a couple of questions. We heard earlier from the department of ag that POCTA, the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*, is largely advisory rather than codified, rather than having mandatory standards. Do you think there are areas of the legislation that we could improve upon that would raise the standards of animal welfare? And maybe it is not needed from your perspective. I will let you answer that, and I will come back to the next one.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Okay. Now, I am not trying to avoid it. It might sound like I am trying to avoid a couple of questions here, but I am not trying to avoid it. I think what is in train at the moment is that codes of practice have been changed into standards and guidelines, and there have been some difficulties, I think, with that process nationally. I think that process, where there is harmonisation across states and territories, with the opportunity for states and territories to utilise those standards and guidelines in terms of their own standards and guidelines and the opportunity where necessary to incorporate those standards into legislation, is a sensible approach. Does that answer the question?

Mr GEPP: Yes, it does. Thank you. And just to my second point, you made mention earlier I think in your opening remarks of two aspects, really, of animal welfare: design of the housing systems et cetera but also ostensibly the capability of the individuals handling the animals. Have we got that training right for those

people? Is there something better that you could suggest to the Committee—whether it is an educational standard, whether it is greater training, whatever it might be—that might lift the handling of animals and therefore improve animal welfare?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: And it is not just handling; it is actually management behaviour,

Mr GEPP: Management, yes.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: They go hand in hand, those. So with one of my colleagues, a psychologist, Professor Grahame Coleman, we have spent about 30 years studying this topic in agriculture and more recently in zoo settings, and companion animal settings even more recently. Technical skills and knowledge are critical to the job, to be competent, but our research clearly indicates that the individual's attitudes to actually interacting with the animal and working with the animal are key determinants of the welfare of the animal. We have done studies—for example, in the pig and the dairy industries—where we have been able to target those key attitudes or beliefs about interacting and working with animals. We have been able to effectively intervene and change those attitudes—because attitudes are learnt, they are not enduring—and we have seen improvements in both animal welfare and productivity, both here in Australia and overseas.

Australian Pork Limited funded a lot of our early work, and then more recently other organisations have funded it. That work has led to training programs here in Australia for pig stock people. The program was recently reviewed and revised, and in the last three years I think 1500 stock people have been through that program. It is an interactive multimedia program that is delivered over the internet, so it is easily accessible. It can be facilitated by trained trainers, and there are something like eight trained trainers in Australia that can actually deliver that program. That program is now being delivered in North America. We have a similar program for dairy farmers. That has not advanced to the same stage as what we call ProHand Pigs, the professional handling of pigs, but that is an example of, together with appropriate technical skills and knowledge training—they go hand in hand—where you will improve the competency of stock people to work with their animals. And it is a win-win situation because when you improve their attitudes towards working with the animal and interacting with the animal you improve things like job satisfaction, work motivation and motivation to learn new skills and knowledge, and they are more likely to be retained in the industry, those stock people.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Professor, for coming along today. Professor, so far our discussion today has been around a whole range of reasons and actions and activities. Ag Vic started to talk about the different Acts that livestock and farm animals are under, but I am interested in your view in relation to the animal welfare of companion animals. I guess I overlay that with the activists so far having very much targeted on-farm activities, but I am seeking to understand your views on animal welfare in terms of companion animals and maybe some quantum around that. Are there some stats around that?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: I will give you my opinion, because I think we know very little at times about the welfare of companion animals—although, based on the behavioural problems that we see and the surrender rates that we see, there appear to be welfare problems. I think one of the major concerns I have about companion animals is the competency of owners to manage those animals, their knowledge around health, nutrition, social requirements et cetera. At least in agriculture there is a certain level of training in terms of some of those competencies around nutrition, recognising health issues, social requirements et cetera. So I do have concerns about the welfare of companion animals.

Ms BATH: And whilst that is in one way outside of the scope of this Committee, in another way if we are looking at animal welfare it would fall under that. What is some of your advice, your suggestions or thoughts, about how that could be improved? Or should we—we are talking about having oversight in terms of cameras and things—extend that further into companion animals?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: I think education and training of companion owners would be very important—actually understanding what is occurring in terms of the welfare of the domestic dog and the domestic cat. We know a lot about farm animals in terms of their welfare and the variation that we see and how we can address some of that variation so that we safeguard animal welfare. I think we know markedly less about companion animals. You could probably also say the same about zoo animals—and animals in research, perhaps, at times.

Mr QUILTY: Would you say that there are systemic issues around welfare with agricultural animals and agriculture in Australia?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: No.

Mr QUILTY: Would you say it is possible to design a system that would be 100 per cent no animal welfare issues at all?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: No. When humans are working with things, mistakes do occur. I think there are a whole range of—and that is part of the problem too, to some extent, I think—animal production systems out there. I think most of them can work. It is actually getting the design and the management right in those systems. If you do that, I think you will be on a plane of continuous improvement you cannot stop. I think our requirements in terms of the welfare of animals will continue to improve—the society's requirements—and so it needs to be a continuous improvement.

Mrs McARTHUR: Professor, I am sure you will get this question from elsewhere, so I will raise it now. You mentioned some of your research was funded by an industry group. Can you perhaps explain the efficacy of your operations so that we can be assured that your research is independent of any vested interest?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: That is fair enough.

Mrs McARTHUR: And secondly, in your expertise studying animal behaviour, would it not be the case that in the natural environment, in the wild, an animal will often leave their young once born? I had a situation recently. Some cows, if they have a difficult birth, will often discard their calf, and farmers who care about the animals will pick up that calf and rear it to ensure that it lives. But in the wild an animal will discard its young often—not often, but on occasions—because that is the nature of how animals behave. Can you expand on that?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: There is no doubt the wild can be harsh for animals. What was the first part of your question?

Mrs McARTHUR: The efficacy of your research.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Right. That is a very good question. In Australia there are the rural research funding organisations where it is joint funding—in general, half from the industry and half from the Federal Government. So it is joint funding to some extent. It is a competitive process, and our research is published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. So I would consider the research of most scientists in Australia that are funded by the rural industry research corporations to be independent. There are pressures on scientists, though, at times. I accept that. But also we get funding from other sources. A major part of our funding comes from the Australian Research Council funding, which is Commonwealth funded.

Ms BATH: Professor, you mentioned smothering before, and we have heard in this Inquiry that activists entered into a chicken shed, a sort of specially designed chicken meat shed for growing chickens, and what happened was that when they entered one end all of the animals, the chickens, ran to the other end. Over the course of a period of hours approximately, so we have been told, 300 of them perished. Can you tell us what happened in that incident? Why does it take that long, and what does that look like from your experience?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Well, I do not know that particular situation, but we have been videoing laying hens in free-range systems both in the range and also indoors, and there are a range of stimuli that influence piling, where they pile up. If they have a certain number of birds in the pile, smothering will occur. Up to 200 or so birds can smother, and some farmers have told me there have been cases of 800 birds smothering. There certainly appears to be startling responses involved, fear responses involved, in some of these piling events and smothering, but there are also, by the look of it, other situations involving curiosity—where one bird may be dust bathing or scratching and it attracts other birds, and if you get a certain number of birds you get a piling effect. So it can occur, by the look of it, and we need to demonstrate this. This is just based on what we are currently seeing and the hypotheses that we are developing to try and evaluate, but it looks like startling responses are involved—but also a range of responses you might call curiosity-type responses, exploratory-type responses.

Ms BATH: One final question. You mentioned, and I think we have touched on it before, good design or design and good management of a system.

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Yes.

Ms BATH: In egg production, could you describe what that looks like?

Prof. HEMSWORTH: Getting the group size right, getting the space allowance right, getting some of the so-called furnishings—some of the things laying hens may be highly motivated to access and utilise—like perches and dust baths. So getting those design features right.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. If there are no further questions, on behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you. You will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.