

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Warragul—Wednesday, 21 August 2019

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Start in camera evidence:**WITNESSES**

[REDACTED]

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The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this in camera hearing of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, the *Defamation Act 2005* and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in the other Australian states and territories. However, it is important that you note that any comments you make outside the hearing, including effective repetition of what you have said in evidence, may not be afforded such privilege. It is also important to note that any action which seeks to impede or hinder a witness or threaten a witness for the evidence they would give or have given may constitute and be punishable as contempt of Parliament. I also remind all others attending the hearing that they may not disclose to any person any evidence that is provided by the witnesses. We are recording the evidence and will provide the proof version of the Hansard transcript at the earliest opportunity so you can correct it as appropriate. I invite you to make a verbal submission, but please state your name for Hansard, thank you.

Mr [REDACTED]

I would just like to start and say that I am very honoured and welcomed to be part of this Inquiry. In my role as an elected representative of the Victorian farmers, I am speaking for other farmers during this testimony, not just myself. There are a couple of things I would like to start off just clarifying so that we have no doubts. There is a difference between animal activism and animal welfare, and I think we need to acknowledge that. Sometimes they are combined into the one issue and they are completely different issues. Animal welfare is a standard of care which animals are raised under. Animal activism believes that animals should not be used by humans for any purpose, and that includes being pets and companion animals. The second part I need to clarify is that we are not here to criticise the point of view of the animal activists. We live in a democracy and they have the right to have their beliefs, the same as we have our beliefs.

In saying that, we are here because we are concerned and frustrated about the violation of farmer safety and security in their homes and workplaces. Everyone expects to have safety and security in their workplaces and at home, and we are no different to what you people are in your profession—you have safety in your workplace and safety in your place of residence. Unfortunately this is not a right that at the moment is presently experienced by the farming community. Due to inadequate trespass laws we have invasions and we have got no scope for any prosecution. Our counterparts in the city at times have what we call home invasions, which are emotional and traumatic, but they have the benefit of strong laws which both the police and the court enforce. Farmers have what we call farm invasion, which is also emotional and traumatic, but it is made worse by the stress on the animals under our care, damage to our facilities and in some cases the removal of stock from our properties. Recent cases of animal activist action which have appeared in court have shown farmers have very little protection under the present system. What farmers are asking for is what every other Victorian takes for granted: laws to protect their families and give them safety and security at work and at their home.

Our other concern is biosecurity. Farmers have been accused of hiding behind biosecurity. I need to point out that good biosecurity requires the farmer to be proactive and not reactive. What I mean by that: biosecurity is there to prevent disease. Once we have got it, it is no good. Australia has earned its reputation as a leading producer of clean, green farm produce due to its stringent biosecurity expertise. While animal activist groups have been quoted as saying they believe they have fulfilled the biosecurity requirements by wearing—excuse me—what I call condom suits, it shows a complete lack of understanding of the breadth of requirements required within the national biosecurity manual.

In closing, we are asking this Inquiry to provide safety and security to farming families, who operate under federal and state legislation and guidelines to produce a huge of range of food so that the Victorian public can exercise the right to choose what they eat.

The CHAIR: Would you like to add anything, or are you happy with that?

[REDACTED]

The things I would like to talk to you about fall under a number of headings. I would like to talk about damage to property. I would like to describe to you what happened in our sheds when we were invaded. I would like to talk to you about the behaviour of the protesters. I would like to talk to you about biosecurity, about the police and about the personal effect it had on my wife and me and then just a couple of general points to finish.

Firstly, our farm was invaded on 1 September 2018 and again our farm was invaded on 8 September 2018. Damage to the property: the protesters entered each of our three sheds looking for dead birds. They ended up focusing in one shed, where 70 of these protesters were lined up across our shed. They broke into the shed at 4 o'clock in the morning on 1 September. They notified the police at approximately 6.30, because they were waiting for my wife and myself to get out of bed and go and conduct our normal morning walk through the sheds, but we were not up at 6.30, so the protesters rang the police and reported a break and enter.

On the property, while they were walking through our sheds, they broke a water line in one of our sheds, which caused a 5000 litre loss of water and a significant flood in that shed. When they settled into what I will call shed 1, with all 70 protesters lined up, wall to wall, across the shed, they did not have any fresh air, and I will explain why a little bit later, but they forced open ventilation systems so that the protesters could have access to fresh air. They did not do the same for the birds, unfortunately. They defaced and wrote graffiti along the side of our sheds with 'Baby killers', 'ALF', 'Animal Liberation Front', which took us 6 hours to clean off. They stole birds when they left the farm, so they were, as they described it, saving lives; so many of these protesters walked off the farm with birds under their arms.

For the protesters to take their photo inside the shed, which they seem to like doing—taking evidence of what they have done—they pushed 18 000 birds in one shed approximately 45 metres into the shed. Now, the chicken sheds are 130 metres long, and in that shed at that time there were 18 000 birds. They pushed those 18 000 birds 45 metres into the shed so that they could then line up across the shed and take their group photo. In doing that, and unbeknownst to them, the temperature sensors down the end of the shed where they pushed the birds away immediately began to read low temperatures. Now, chicken sheds are very technical computer-managed environments for temperature, for ammonia, for humidity, for clean fresh air, for air speed across the birds—everything about the management systems of poultry sheds is there for optimum growing conditions and welfare of the birds.

What the protesters did in pushing the birds up the shed is they completely interfered with the management systems of the shed. So the shed control system shut the shed down thinking that the average temperature was so cold that it did not require ventilation. The birds were therefore starved of fresh air, they were starved of oxygen, and worse than that, where the protesters entered the shed the last feed line in a 130-metre shed has a particular feed pan called a trigger pan. When the birds are spread across the shed evenly and they wake up in the morning for their morning feed, at approximately 4.30, they will eat the feed across the shed. But the feed in the trigger pan, as that becomes empty, a little sail switch will flick open and the entire feed line will start up and pull feed through the silos into the shed and down all the feed lines. When the feed line is completely full that last trigger pan fills up and the sail switch will close and the feed line will turn off.

Because the protesters entered the shed where the trigger pan end is the birds had no feed. The protesters were in that shed from 4.00 am until approximately 10.45 am. The chickens completely ate all of the feed out of the pans where they could get it and then they began to starve. They did not even have their morning feed. So when the protesters eventually left our farm and we were able to return the shed to normal activity the chickens gorged themselves, and when chickens gorge themselves they will climb over anything to get into those feed

pans. That includes scratching each other on the back, attacking each other around the head and around the eyes, just to get to the feed.

So my understanding of that is that although the protesters thought they were saving, making a statement, trying to raise awareness of something, the damage they caused to the birds is actually measurable. Not only did the birds suffer as a result of being starved of fresh, clean air, they also smothered—that is, the birds try and crowd around each other. They get very scared and frightened. When my wife and I work in the sheds, we work in the sheds alone. When you have 70 people walking up and down the sheds trying to clamber over water lines and feeders and sort through what they think are sick chickens, the chickens will smother against the wall, they will pile up five, six, seven or eight deep—so a pile of chickens that high—and the chickens down the bottom simply die. We lost 300 chickens as a result of the birds being pushed up in the shed and through the shed conditions not being ideal for the animals' welfare. The humidity rose, which is also bad, because the chickens generate a lot of heat. Their natural body temperature is 40 degrees, and without adequate ventilation they become very uncomfortable.

The next thing I would like to talk about is the behaviour of the protesters. The first thing I would like to point out to you is that our farm is our home. They invaded our home. We have our family home there. It is our livelihood and it is our life. They did not invade a business, they invaded our home. To have the police knock on your door at 6.30 in the morning and get up in your dressing-gown, the first thing that goes through your mind is 'Has one of the kids had a car accident?'. Then the police say, 'No, no. Have you reported a break and enter?'. I said, 'No, I haven't'. He said, 'Well, could you get dressed and come and open your farm gate. We have had a report of a break and enter'.

So these people invaded our home, and when I got dressed and walked down with the police I was absolutely confronted. I was fearful. These people had dark clothes. They had hoodies on. They did not want to be easily recognised. I did not know who they were. To all intents and purposes they were terrorists. They presented like terrorists. They could have had baseball bats, they could have had knives, they could have had guns. I do not know. All I know is that there were 70 people in one of our sheds, which is a horrifying thing to confront. In their manner they are confrontational, they are abusive, and they wanted us to engage them to cause a scene, which we did not. So we were frightened. The image was one of terrorism, and we were very fearful for our safety. They called us killers, they called us animal abusers and they called us criminals. They said that they would return and they did, one week later. That is when they spray-painted the side of one of our sheds with the graffiti. On approaching one of the protesters before the police asked us to return to the house, I asked them why they were there and what they hoped to achieve, and I said to the policeman who was beside me, 'I hope you're going to arrest these people'. And this gentleman said to me, 'I've been arrested 17 times. I've never been charged'—and excuse my language—'so go fuck yourself'. And that was the attitude.

We manage our farm under strict biosecurity. Our farm is biosecure, with locks on all gates and appropriate legal signage. We have footbaths to sanitise all footwear. We have a visitors declaration for contact with any avian species or pigs before they are allowed to enter our farm, and that is for disease control, particularly the H5N1 bird virus and ILT, which is rife in the industry and easily spread on people's bodies. And anyone that has been in contact with any avian species, whether it be a pet budgie or a chicken that lays eggs in your backyard, is not allowed in our biosecurity area. So to have 70 people in our sheds was an enormous risk to the biosecurity of our farm. We also have hand sanitiser at each entry point to the shed and—even my wife and myself—every time we enter the shed we wash our boots and we wash our hands in sanitiser. However, these people walked through mud to get into our sheds—through cow paddocks and sheep paddocks, through a back entry into our farm—and that, again, posed a risk to biosecurity.

So there were 70 protesters in the sheds and there were another 30 in the driveway. The police said that there were simply too many people to arrest. It was too much paperwork to process—particularly since it had to be in triplicate, apparently—and if they did arrest people and subsequently charge them, there would be 70 court cases to attend, and they simply did not have the time to undertake that kind of activity. Therefore the police explained to us that the best outcome was to get them off the property peacefully and quietly.

The police also said that if they were to arrest them they would have to get police buses to take them away and they were not available, because we were on the Mornington Peninsula and not in the city, and they would require too much backup. The police had explained to us that in the past, when the protesters were approached

with arrest warrants, the protesters then padlocked themselves to any equipment they could find in the sheds and they simply had an extended sit-in. The police said that if they took them on it could be days before we got them out of the shed and the police did not want to entertain that. Therefore there were no arrests through the entire event on our property.

The personal effect: well, I am now retired. We have sold our farm. I am okay but my wife is not. I am probably fairly fortunate in that I have a corporate background and I have had training in disaster recovery and various things like that so I was able to keep a reasonably level head, but I cannot say the same for my wife. She lost a lot of sleep. Our dog would bark at 2 o'clock in the morning following these events, because our dog will bark at a possum up a tree on the farm. Then [REDACTED] will be out of bed. She will get me out of bed, dressing-gown on, high-beam torch in hand, on the quad bike riding around the sheds, checking the boundary to the property and then back to bed. And my wife cannot get back to sleep. This went on for months. So the level of anxiety, leading to depression, was very harsh on her. It was a matter of constant surveillance, both day and night.

The following batch that we ran—the chickens have a life of 49 days, so our farm was cleaned out every 49 days, and the protesters were holding a protest at the Ingham processing plant on the night of one of our pick-ups. And the protesters were following the semitrailers to a number of farms, one of which was ours. And so the police were then following the protesters, following the semitrailers, to ensure that they did not go onto farms. The police supported that activity for about 1 hour but a pick-up event can go for 7 hours, so I was therefore in my ute driving up and down the main road and around the perimeter to our property. Every time I saw headlights stop I was in my ute and going to see if there was anyone in those vehicles at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, to make sure that the protesters were not going to return to our farm yet again. So lack of sleep, the fear, the anxiety, the depression and the constant surveillance just took its toll on us, and we decided that we just had to sell up and get the hell out—so we did.

A couple of extra notes. The vegans—the activists—they were made up of three groups. There was the Animal Liberation Front, another group called Melbourne Chicken Save and another group called Meat The Victims. They insisted that Channel 9 and Channel 7 be allowed onto the property, and we denied them that, but Channel 9 did interview them in the driveway to our property. The leading activist appears to be a girl called Leah Doellinger. When interviewed by Channel 9, Channel 9 asked her what they wanted—what did they hope to achieve? She said that they would not stop until every Australian is vegan. And I find that most peculiar. If the reason that they have invaded our farm, destroyed our life and caused us to lose our livelihood is because they believe that every Australian should be vegan and they will not stop until every Australian is vegan, I find that ridiculous.

They demanded the TV be allowed into the sheds, and we again denied them that. Approximately 30 of these people arrived in the back of a Budget furniture van which was hired, I believe, in Frankston, because one of them told us that. Thirty people on the back of a furniture van unrestrained, hanging onto the rails in the back of the van, transported from Frankston to Mornington, and yet the police made no effort to find out who hired the truck. They made no effort to approach these people and allowed them to leave in the same vehicle.

We believe that they had visited the property previously to understand the entry points and our equipment. Our dead birds are frozen, and they broke into our freezers to pull frozen birds out. They understood where our control rooms were, where our computer control systems were. They understood where the back entry doors were to the farm, and they could only have done this at night. To enter the property at night they have to come across three barbed wire fences and two drains, and they entered the property on the night of the protest through that method. To do that they must have been there before to understand how to get across neighbouring properties onto our farm.

It was not until they were notified of damage, the water leak in shed 2, that they actually agreed to leave. So at that point the police thanked us for bringing it to their attention, and they said now that they had actually caused damage to the property the police were able to approach them with arrests and charges. Then the police said, 'But if you agree to leave, we won't proceed with that', and they did agree to leave. They had battery packs strapped onto their wrists—significantly sized battery packs like that strapped onto their wrists. They had GoPro cameras on their heads. The police asked us to check our entire shedding for what is called cigarette cameras, so little tiny cameras the size of that that they can stick up into your beams and behind pieces of

equipment that are very, very hard to identify. It took us a day to walk through our sheds to clearly identify that no such cameras were put onto our farm.

Lastly, I would just like to point out to you that our farm is RSPCA-accredited. We have been audited by the RSPCA for seven years—initially five times a year, but because of our good record we were taken back to two times a year. Our farm has never had a non-compliance. Our farm has never failed an audit. We are also members of FREPA, the free-range egg and poultry association. Again, we get audited once a year. We have never had a non-compliance with FREPA and we have never failed an audit. We also manage our farm in keeping with the PrimeSafe regulations for Victoria. My wife and I have undertaken a chemical users course and the Chicken Care program, and our farm has a full environmental management plan. So just to let you know that we do run a good clean, well-organised, well-equipped farm.

The CHAIR: Thank you. As you see, there are many of us here. I will try to make my questions very to the point. How do you think the Government should respond about all these issues we have mentioned: animal activists, animal welfare, farmer safety and biosecurity?

██████████: I agree with what ██████ said before: everyone has the right to hold an opinion and everyone has the right to protest. What they do not have the right to do is to invade people's homes. How would these people feel if I broke into their house at 4 o'clock in the morning and sat down with 10 other chicken farmers, turned their TV on and carried a couple of buckets of KFC in there with me and said, 'We're not leaving until every Australian eats KFC', and while we were there we terrorised them—we played with their minds, we made them fearful. That is what they did to us—they ruined our life. What I would like the Government to do is to make sure that there is a consequence for criminal behaviour. What they did was criminal, so I think there needs to be a consequence because their activity and the aggression of their activity is getting more and more brazen because there is no consequence. I find it incredible that the police did not arrest any of these people. I find that simply gobsmacking. The police were supportive of us. They made sure that we were okay mentally and physically, but to not charge these people when there is an abundance of offences going on—they stole chickens from our farm. They took chickens off our property.

██████████: Look, I think we need to follow where Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales have gone. They have reinforced their trespass laws. I will reiterate what I said before: everybody has their point of view. Our area of concern is the way that they are using farmers to force their point of view onto the rest of society.

Ms BATH: Thank you for your presentation, gentlemen—██████████. First of all, ██████, I would like to say a heartfelt 'Sorry' to you and your wife and family and staff that you have been subjected to this in Australia, in Victoria, in our lovely country. I just find it appalling. I can see here today the emotional toll it has taken on you and I can only imagine the toll it has taken on your wife and your staff. I think for me your testimony is very powerful. I am really at a loss to know what to ask you because you have explained it so beautifully—well, 'beautifully' is not the word, but with great clarity. The thing that I do not understand is why the police did not make any arrests. I know, ██████, in your submission here you have supplied some information from the Honourable Jill Hennessy that talks about livestock and farm crime specialists. There are 75 of them around the state. I guess I am interested to know what you think: what should we do be doing as Parliament to bolster support for the police to do the work—to make arrests and then to bring about convictions of people doing these crimes?

██████████: My niece, who is a 23-year-old, is a lot smarter than me with the use of mobile phones, as most young people are. One of the things the activists did was that immediately following the night of the first invasion they posted all of their photos on Facebook. One of the photos they took was a little video of the people getting off the furniture van. My niece used a thing called Facebook Recognition. She took little copies of every face and zoomed in on it, and she came up with a Facebook address and a name for that person. So if you are on Facebook you can actually do a thing called facial recognition. She gave me that list, and I rang the senior sergeant at Frankston and said to her that I had access to that list and asked would they like to follow up on the people being transported in the truck. She said to me that they knew who the people were. They were not going to arrest them but they were monitoring them—that they were professional protesters, that a lot of them came from Queensland and a lot of them came from South Australia. They knew them from their plane

bookings at airports, they were monitoring them and following them, and the police would be taking the appropriate action in time, and that is all I was told.

My daughter found out that they sourced their funding for their uniforms and their printed shirts and their signage and their transport—they used a site called GoFundMe. And my daughter actually rang the police and said, ‘Why are these people allowed to raise money for illegal activities on a public funding site?’. Again she was told by the police that they were well aware of that and that it was under control. So that is the only follow-up that we have had in terms of what the police may be likely to do in the future, but as far as I know nothing has happened as a result of anything to do with our farm.

██████████: I will acknowledge there has been no direct confrontation between farmers and activists so far. At the chicken meat group we have got plans. We have instructed our members that if they are confronted with protesters, exactly what ██████ did: they are meant to ring the police, ring the processors—because they are the processors’ birds—and take their family and lock themselves in the house. While I would like to think I am God, I can make those rules, it does not mean that I can enforce them onto people. We have a lot of chicken farmers of European origin, and they have a different perspective about defending their land to what we have. My main concern is that the laws at present do not support our police. So I am not saying that the police are at danger, but they are being put in a very compromising position. I think it will only be a matter of time before there is a confrontation between the activists and farmers, and I do not want to see a farmer injured, I do not want to see an activist injured or—even worse—I do not want to see any fatalities. That is my concern if this keeps going on. As I said, we have instructed them otherwise but I have not got that power that I can enforce it, and people react in different ways if their families are threatened.

██████████: I will add one more thing, Melina, if I may, and that is that we do not have guns on our farm but being primary producers we are able to have guns on the farm, mainly for the control of vermin—particularly, in our industry, foxes. I know many chicken farms do have a number of guns, both shotguns and rifles, and understanding the ethnic background of quite a number of chicken farmers, there are people out there in the farming community who have very strong views against animal activists, and the things that are said in the farming community are not good in terms of what retaliation some farmers would be prepared to make if these people ever showed up at their front gate trying to get into their farm. And I think that that needs to be flagged, because there are certainly firearms on rural properties.

Ms BATH: Legal firearms.

██████████: Legal; absolutely.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, gentlemen, for both coming today and for your testimonies. The first question I would like to ask—and I am going to try and keep these things brief because I know we have a time frame—is: how prevalent are these invasions? Notwithstanding the two that you have had, ██████, how prevalent are these? How often do they occur?

██████████: I believe there is—in Victoria?

Mr MEDDICK: Yes.

██████████: They have raided a whole range. In the chicken industry I believe there have only been two.

Mr MEDDICK: But they would be our gentleman here.

██████████: ██████ and another one. But they have raided the Pakenham livestock exchange on numerous occasions. That is in the livestock industry. They have raided or protested outside the processing plants.

Mr MEDDICK: But a protest outside a plant is not an invasion by any stretch, though.

██████████: No. To be honest, senator, if they want to protest outside the farms, we will be upset, but that is the legal method of doing it. What we are here about is the entry into the farms.

Mr MEDDICK: You understand that some of these people may be doing these actions because they believe that the practices that you are participating in as standard practice or codes of practice might necessarily be cruel and that the general public might also, because we have seen leaked footage from places. Would you agree that the general public and therefore these people might consider some of these practices cruel?

[REDACTED]: I will answer that. I have read the thing.

Mr MEDDICK: I am just trying to justify that.

[REDACTED]: They want to be called whistleblowers. I would disagree with that statement. They raided [REDACTED] property. We have responsible authorities in charge of animal welfare, at both national and state levels. If they were whistleblowers, they should have made a complaint about the way [REDACTED] treated his animals. There was no complaint made about that farm, but what they did do—

Mr MEDDICK: I am not necessarily addressing [REDACTED]—

[REDACTED]: is that they took publicity photos. To me, the sole purpose of raiding [REDACTED] farm was that they had crowdfunded it, and they took publicity photos in that shed to justify where the money had gone.

Mr MEDDICK: I am talking in a broader sense here, not that specific example. But, if I may, [REDACTED], what your testimony here is saying is that you have a facility that in your opinion and in industry opinion is of the highest quality and highest welfare standards et cetera. My questions were around transparency, I guess, to the end consumer, that a lot of people—91 per cent of Australians by an Australian Government survey actually—are concerned that animal welfare standards on farms are not what they want as consumers. That is what this speaks to—transparency. Would you be in favour then, for instance, of mandatory CCTV so that your industry can prove to the public that these practices are not cruel?

[REDACTED]: To be honest, I believe that is a debate for another inquiry. If those people want to instigate that as an inquiry, I believe that is an inquiry that they should instigate through the legal channels, like this Inquiry has been instigated, and that is a debate we have there—

Mr MEDDICK: But it is part of the terms of reference for this Inquiry, so therefore we are debating it here.

[REDACTED]: I do not believe it is an animal welfare debate.

The CHAIR: We will come back to this.

[REDACTED]: If I could make a comment on that?

Mr MEDDICK: Sure. Certainly, please.

[REDACTED]: The RSPCA in terms of consumer trust—I do not know this for a fact, but I would assume that it is more than likely one of the most trusted brands in Australia. I am talking in terms of consumer awareness, which is a direct response to your question. Our farm was RSPCA certified and regularly audited and never failed. We are also FREPA audited. We also run according to the Ingham's growers manual, which has a huge piece around PrimeSafe, and we have attended every training course, beyond what we would be required to do to ensure that we are educated, capable managers and able to look after the birds under our care, not forgetting that we get paid by the chicken. Every chicken that we lose through mortality, every chicken that we put into the processing plant that is not of a processing quality standard is income that we do not get. Our farm is financed. We have debt to pay off. We have to live and run our business. Why would we want to not look after the animals in our care, even if we did not like animals, even if we just said, 'This is just about money'? Why would we go to any form of negligence, to not be growing the best chickens possible, giving them the best life possible, meeting every requirement and standard that we have a duty of care to provide? Why would you not want to do that?

Mr MEDDICK: I will come back when we get another chance.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, [REDACTED], for giving us this incredible insight into this absolutely outrageous behaviour that you have had to endure. Like Melina, I pass on my extreme sympathies to you for

what has happened to you. It is just unconscionable that anywhere in Australia this should be allowed to occur and actually nothing be done about it. I just think it is not acceptable that the police do not make arrests. I do not care whether there are 500 court cases that have to be held—that is no excuse for not prosecuting somebody that embarks on criminal behaviour. I just think that you might want to tell us exactly what needs to be done—how we can strengthen the arm of the police to ensure that they do make arrests and that charges are properly prosecuted. Do we need to make the criminal laws stronger so that invasion of property is a criminal offence of much higher magnitude? Because I totally accept that your farm is your home. You were dragged out of bed in that situation.

I wonder if you would comment on the fact that these people purport to know more about animal—they call it rights, not welfare—than you, the RSPCA. All the accreditation authorities apply. How is it that they seem to think they know more than the industry, than the regulators, about how animals should be treated? Given your exemplary record of performance in the industry it is totally unacceptable and unconscionable that what happened has gone without any repercussions.

[REDACTED]: The mere fact that they caused the death of 300 birds by smothering and put the entire flock in that shed through a period of severe discomfort in terms of good animal welfare shows me that they clearly do not understand poultry farming, they do not understand modern poultry shedding, they do not understand that these chickens are given a better life than most people. These chickens live in fully air-conditioned and heated shedding. It is a very nice atmosphere.

We know they have the right to protest. They have the right to eat vegetables. I do not mind that. What they do not have the right to do—

Mrs McARTHUR: We all eat vegetables.

The CHAIR: So what do you believe the action should be? That is Bev's question.

[REDACTED]: I think, as Beverley has said, that the police need to be empowered and that they need to be armed with the law to implement, charge and punish these people.

Mr QUILTY: It has been very good. Looking at the summary of offences here, it has been very useful to look at and see what the current situation is. Now, you say other states are increasing the penalties. Do you think if other states do that and Victoria does not, that will lead to people coming here for additional attacks? We heard that these people were travelling from interstate for this attack, so if we fail to increase penalties, do you think that will lead to an increase in people crossing into Victoria to carry these attacks out?

[REDACTED]: So what you are asking is if we increase the penalties—

Mr QUILTY: If we do not and other states do.

[REDACTED]: I believe they will, because if you have a look at the states that have been targeted by animal activists the most, there has been a reliance on Western Australia, and up until their review of their penalties, or their laws, they had the most lenient laws in Australia. So I do believe that there is a lot of moving around between the protesters running interstate. I cannot specifically say that will happen, but I believe we do run the gamble of that happening.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, gentlemen, for coming in. I am staggered that our system has failed you. For the police not to be able to charge people I just find absolutely amazing. I also lived on a farm, and I have also lived in the city. I have been broken into on four occasions, and you have been broken into. I expected the police to act when I got broken into, and they did. I do not care about the magnitude of how many people were there—you needed to be protected by the law. We all have a right to be protected by law against those breaking the law.

So the others have touched on penalties. I am not 100 per cent sure fining will always work. I think there is a bit of a problem with education. Mr Meddick has pointed out that a lot of people are concerned about farming practices. I think there is a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation. Do you think that is an area where as

an industry we could do better to educate the public and say how these processes work inside the farming sheds?

██████████: Look, I would agree with that statement. I come back to biosecurity; we are not hiding behind biosecurity. It plays a very important part not just in chicken farming but in a lot of industries. I suppose I am a bit amused about why a lot of these animal activists are preaching the vegan philosophy. The philosophy is based on a horticultural plant-based diet, and horticulture has a more stringent biosecurity regime than livestock does. So it is not like livestock has invented biosecurity to protect itself; it is a whole philosophy, and all agricultural entities have it. I do believe that it is something we need to work on to open our farms up a bit more, but we need to do it scientifically and—

Mr BARTON: Carefully, yes, of course.

██████████: Yes. It is just not opening it up by letting 70 protesters on there because they have got a different view to what we have got. I need to go back—we do have federal and state legislation. If the protesters do not believe that is strong enough, there are legal ways they need to do it.

Ms TERPSTRA: Just very quickly, I know we are running out of time, but reading your submission, ██████████ there are some conclusions that you make at the end of it. Thank you both for very eloquently explaining things. I have actually learned a lot in listening to both of you, and I am really sorry for what you have had to go through, ██████████ it sounds like a very traumatic experience. But I am just wondering, taking into account both of your pieces of testimony here today, is it a fair thing to say, do you think, that the penalties may be adequate but that there is a lack of enforcement, or do you think the penalties also need to be increased? What is the balance, do you think? Are you able to elaborate?

██████████: Probably both.

Ms TERPSTRA: You think both. In your experience, though, ██████████ the penalties were not enforced is what you were saying, pretty much—there were no arrests made or—

██████████: Correct.

Ms TERPSTRA: So I am just wondering: is it what you were saying, a bit of both?

██████████: Look, there has been through the farming community, I suppose, criticism of the police. I am not taking that. I understand where the police are coming from. They have got a lot more important issues to deal with than some protests. Look, ██████████ is quite critical and a lot of the farming—I am looking at it from a broader perspective. The police have a lot on their plate, and I made the comment before that I do not believe the laws and the courts are backing up the police. I actually feel like the police are in a compromising position, and I think the way they handled ██████████ case where they negotiated, it was more important to get the protesters off the farm and worry about the chickens than have them sit there and argue about who we were going to prosecute. Our main concern is always the animals, so we probably do not push it hard enough to get the results we desire because our main concern at the moment when we see this happen is the animals under our care and that they are fully catered for. So I am not as critical of the police. I feel very sympathetic towards the police because I do not believe they are getting the support. Either the laws are not strong enough or the courts are not interpreting the laws to hand out the correct punishment.

Mr GEPP: Thank you so much, gentlemen. I am very moved by your story, ██████████. It is one that I think is going to sit for a long time with all members of the panel. I sincerely hope that you and your wife are okay moving forward and getting the support that you need—particularly your wife, so that she is okay in the future. A quick comment about CCTV, and I will ask you to comment on this: it seems to me your testimony earlier, ██████████, was that it does not appear as if there is anything that you could do to ameliorate the views of some of the animal activists. So even if you had CCTV in your sheds, it would not be enough—they are opposed to the consumption of animals by humans. So I would ask you to comment on that. But also how did they particularly target your farm, ██████████ Why was yours selected? Have you got any intelligence on why they did that, and not your neighbour's, for example?

██████████: I said to the police, ‘Why would they have come here? How did they know that we were an RSPCA farm?’. Because I think their protest was actually against the RSPCA; it was not against us as farmers. It was an anti-RSPCA protest as well as being ‘we want every Australian to eat vegetables and not meat’. So they found out that our birds were 40 days old; they found out that we were due for pick-up. So therefore our sheds were coming up to what we would call near maximum density, and they knew we were RSPCA. But our farms did not advertise; there is no advertising or signage. So the police feel that the animal activists go to quite some trouble to get employees inside—employees of their own or current employee sympathisers within the RSPCA and within the major processors around Australia—so that they can get and glean information which would allow them to target certain farms at certain times. That is what the police told me.

The CHAIR: Anything further?

██████████: To answer your question, look, if you look at a lot of the animal activist associations, their major goal is to remove meat from the dietary requirements of people. I suppose if you really want to get philosophical, it is about democracy. They are using democracy to voice their concerns or their views. But the people of Victoria and Australia already, because we live in a democracy, have the choice of what they want to eat, how they want to eat it and when they want to eat it. But they do not want people to make the decision; they want to make the decision for them. From a simple puritan point of view, that to me is stretching democracy to the limit.

So the other area is that they do not believe that animals are put on earth to serve humans, and that is also companion animals. I get very upset when you read about companion animals and the amount that are put down by the RSPCA. Companion animals are different to farming animals in the sense that they are pets. We do not claim our animals are ever pets, and yet people who accept the responsibility of having a companion animal and a pet do not look after them. Yet there is nothing said about that because we do not actually eat them. I feel fundamentally they are part of the family, and what happens to them is more of an animal welfare issue than what they believe is happening on farms.

The CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and contribution, and you will receive a copy of the transcript.

██████████: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

Further in camera evidence follows.