

31 July 2019

Chair
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: legcon.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Members

Criminal Code Amendment (Agricultural Protection) Bill 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *Criminal Code Amendment (Agricultural Protection) Bill 2019* (Cth).

The RSPCA does not support any kind of illegal activity in the pursuit of animal welfare objectives. We believe such activities are divisive and ultimately counterproductive to the mission of securing better protections for animals.

It is therefore disappointing that we find ourselves at a point in history where it is deemed necessary to enact legislation designed specifically to protect farmers from animal activists. While law and order responses may be necessary to curb the excesses of activist behaviour, we also owe it to the farming community to look beyond these measures and consider what is driving such behaviour in the first place.

Activism does not occur in a vacuum. Increasing incidents of protests of various forms against the treatment of animals in farming is a growing trend witnessed throughout the developed world and it is showing no signs of slowing. There are broader social and cultural issues at play here that must be acknowledged if we are to develop a truly effective strategy for protecting the future of animal agriculture.

Recent research commissioned by the federal Department of Agriculture - [Australia's Shifting Mindset on Farm Animal Welfare](#) - found that 95% of Australians are concerned about farm animal welfare and 91% want to see reform to address it. The report found that failing to respond to these concerns will accelerate eroding levels of community trust and confidence in animal agriculture and the Australian Government's performance in regulating acceptable welfare standards. Low levels of trust also give rise to increasing levels of protest and activism as we have seen recently with the increased incidents of 'vegan activists' entering farming properties. This was foreshadowed by rural sociologists Parbery and Wilkinson in their 2012 report for Agriculture Victoria - *Victorians' Attitudes to Farming*.¹

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¹ P Parbery and R Wilkinson, 'Victorians' Attitudes to Farming' (2012) Department of Primary Industries, Victoria.



Governments across Australia must look more broadly at initiatives designed to build community trust and confidence in animal agriculture. Evidence shows that investment in improving livestock welfare standards and transparency in production practices is an effective means of achieving this.

The study 'Opening the Doors to Agriculture: The Effect of Transparent Communication on Attitude', suggested that transparent communication between the livestock industry and the wider community was likely to result in more favourable attitudes towards farming, especially amongst the millennial generation.² By contrast, another study found that community awareness about laws that endeavour to restrict information about animal agricultural practices have been found to erode trust in farmers.³ The reduction in trust observed was as pronounced amongst initially trusting demographic categories (i.e. rural, omnivores) as it was among least trusting groups (i.e. urban, vegetarians) and was found to ultimately increase support for regulations aimed at protecting farm animal welfare.

Government has a significant role to play in promoting transparency and building trust by ensuring robust animal welfare compliance monitoring systems are in place and that there is public reporting on compliance activities to provide assurances to the community that appropriate standards are being met.

Improving animal welfare standards in line with community expectations and stronger compliance monitoring should be embraced by Government and seen as an investment in future-proofing livestock and other animal industries against changing community expectations and the increasing levels of scrutiny that follows.

We encourage Committee Members to look beyond the provisions of the Bill in this inquiry and to investigate the broader context for why the Bill is deemed necessary. Why is there an increase in the levels of animal activism in Australia? What is the state of animal welfare in livestock agriculture? To what extent do our standards of livestock husbandry meet mainstream community expectations about animal welfare? How much are State, Territory, and Federal Governments actually investing in improving animal welfare standards and compliance monitoring to ensure appropriate standards are being met, and to what extent is this being communicated to the Australian public to provide assurances?

These are the questions we encourage Committee Members to consider in this inquiry. They are questions the RSPCA is well-placed to advise on should the Committee require further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bidha Jones', written in a cursive style.

Dr Bidha Jones
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² J.N Rumble & T Irani, '[Opening the Doors to Agriculture: The Effect of Transparent Communication on Attitude](#)', *Journal of Applied Communications*, 100, 2, (2016), 57-72.

³ J.A Robbins, B Franks, D.M Weary, M.A.G von Keyserlingk, '[Awareness of ag-gag laws erodes trust in farmers and increases support for animal welfare regulations](#)', *Food Policy*, 61, 1, 121-125.