

**RSPCA AUSTRALIA AND RSPCA NSW
JOINT SUBMISSION**

LICENCE FOR MORUYA RODEO

20th January 2023

1. Introduction

The RSPCA commends the Eurobodalla Council for seeking public views on the future licensing of the Moruya Rodeo and appreciates the opportunity to provide comment. The treatment of animals in rodeos is of increasing concern, particularly in relation to causing fear, pain and distress. Where animals are used in sport and entertainment, their treatment must be justified and of the highest standard. There is currently a global trend in relation to challenging the impact on animals used in rodeos due to changing community expectations and recognition of a lack of legal protection. The RSPCA is opposed to rodeos and rodeo schools because of the potential for significant injury, suffering or distress to the animals involved. The use of painful devices such as flank straps, spurs and electric prods contributes to suffering associated with this sport. (see Appendix 1 – RSPCA Rodeo Policy)

The RSPCA would be happy to provide further context and discussion on the points made in this document.

1. Societal values

Community views have changed in the last 30 years, particularly towards animals, with the community having greater awareness and questioning of how animals are treated in various contexts including farming practices, research, sport and entertainment. There is greater acknowledgement that animals are sentient, i.e. they are aware of or capable of experiencing positive and negative mental states. Growing awareness of the implications of animal use and management of welfare has led to rising public expectations and lower levels of tolerance for conditions perceived as adequate (Sandoe & Christiansen 2008). Many years ago, world renowned animal ethicist Professor Bernie Rollin, from Colorado State University, identified rodeos – particularly calf-roping – as a key example of ‘problematic animal use’ which degrades the moral status of animals (Rollin, 1996).

While rodeos have been a part of country culture in some parts of Australia for a long time, an increasing number of Australians are becoming aware of the suffering caused to animals and are calling for these events to end. In addition animal welfare organisations around the world oppose rodeos on welfare grounds including

- Sentient, the Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics [Rodeos | Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics](#);
- NZ SPCA [Advice & welfare: The animal welfare problem with rodeos • SPCA New Zealand](#);
- Vancouver Humane Society [Call for a ban on inhumane rodeo events in your community – Vancouver Humane Society](#)
- US Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association http://www.hsvma.org/rodeos_inherent_cruelty_to_animals.

In 2015, polling showed 52% of respondents in Australian urban and rural areas were concerned or very concerned about the welfare of animals in rodeos. In 2018, this increased by 11% to 63%. In the latest polling in 2022 we found another increase by 4% showing 67% of the public concerned or very concerned about the welfare of animals in rodeos (McCrindle 2015, 2019, 2022). This indicates that the vast majority of Australians are concerned about the welfare of animals in rodeos, with the trend increasing.

2. Animal welfare impacts

Advances in animal welfare science has added to our knowledge on the impact humans and the environment have on animals, especially regarding mental impact. Neuroscientists have found that primal emotions can evoke specific feelings, e.g. fear evokes anxiety. With the help of science we have moved on from thinking that animal cruelty only pertains to obvious physical abuse as we now also consider the impact on mental well-being, i.e. impact of isolation on herd/social animals, confinement to a barren environment and the inability to express normal behaviour can cause stress and suffering. Also, the mental effect of physical impacts needs to be considered. For example, animals experience a negative mental state of hunger, if deprived of food, pain if injured and thirst if deprived of water. Science has shown us the need to expand our responsibility to animals to not only prevent pain and suffering, i.e. negative experiences, but that it is incumbent upon us to provide the opportunity for positive experiences so that animals have a 'life worth living'.

There are many negative impacts on animals used in rodeos mainly due to cattle and horses being prey species and therefore they are highly sensitive to the presence of perceived predators (humans who behave like a predator) including;

- a. **Fear and stress** – for animals used in roping events, especially calves, and steers used in steer wrestling; animals literally 'run for their lives' only to be chased down by a horse and rider (perceived as a predator); the stress response is known as a 'flight' response which is one strategy used by prey animals; for bull riding and horse bronco riding, the bucking is a 'fight' response which is an attempt to rid the rider (predator) and the tight flank strap (also a perceived threat) around the sensitive underbelly (in bulls, the flank strap applies pressure to the prepuce and in some bulls, possibly the penis). Bulls may also exhibit a flight response as evidenced by bulls attempting to escape the chute (see photo 1) or hurl themselves at solid objects to rid themselves of the rider or flank strap. Only when the rider has been thrown or dismounts and the flank strap is loosened do they quieten down. In some instances, bulls are so stressed that they then charge the rider on the ground.

Image 1 – Bull rearing out of the chute likely due to fear and distress



Bucking horses show many signs of experiencing fear and distress including flared nostrils, fixed stare, mouth gaping and escape attempts.

Image 2 - Horses with a wide open mouth has been attributed to the described stressed facial expressions (Veterinarians for Animal Protection, 2005).



Several studies focusing on calf roping have reported the following;

- Calves have been found to show physiological stress responses during calf-roping, irrespective of whether they had been roped previously (Sinclair et al 2016).
- Another study reported significant increases in the concentrations of enzymes associated with muscle damage and the stress hormone cortisol in roped calves. One third of the roped calves also showed head-shaking and sham-chewing compared to calves who were not roped (Fisher 2003).
- A more recent study reported that calves during the 'chase' phase (after leaving the chute but prior to being lassoed) appeared to be more stressed, fearful, anxious and agitated compared to when the ropes were released (Rizzuto et al 2020).
- A newly published article which examined video footage of calf roping from two Australian rodeos revealed that calves showed signs of distress and fear across all stages of roping, calling into the question the continuation of this event (Dixon et al 2023).

Bellowing is also observed in calves, particularly when they are caught and restrained to be tied up. Vocalisation has been reported to be associated with poor welfare (Grandin 2001).

The following video footage shows many signs of fear and distress displayed by calves including escape attempts, bellowing, eye white, tail swishing.

<https://youtu.be/tRLJqRGQzTs> (Warning - this footage is graphic and may be distressing for some viewers)

Although all rodeo events pose significant welfare risks, calf roping is considered the worse as it involves calves who may be as young as 4 months of age and the violent nature of lassoing where calves are pulled off their feet – this has been referred to as ‘horizontal hanging’. The Australian Veterinary Association does not support calf roping.

b. Injuries –

Injury risks include;

- lacerations, abrasions, bruising, muscle and tissue damage caused whilst in the chute due to heavy contact with the rails and gates and bruising and tissue damage by spurs used in bucking events, particularly bronco riding as animals are kicked;

- muscle and bone injuries in bucking bulls with some suffering fractured legs; for example, in December 2017, a bull suffered a broken leg and had to be euthanased during an event in Adelaide (Video footage <https://youtu.be/Ly9xihVGpGg> Warning - this footage is graphic and may be distressing for some viewers). In early 2018, two bulls were euthanased at a Queensland hotel rodeo event due to leg fractures suffered upon release from the chute and another bull was euthanased due to a leg fracture at a rodeo school in Rockhampton. These incidents are only identified if reported by a member of the public. Unlike racing steward reports, there are no requirements for rodeo organisers to publicly report incidents.

Furthermore a comparative study has shown that over 70% of bucking bulls showed muscle and bone injuries compared to 46% of bulls not used for bucking in rodeos (Smith et al 2017). Bucking bulls were 13 times more likely to have a spinal disorder than non-bucking bulls and they were more likely to develop horn disorders.

With calf roping, the risks of injury include:

- damage to the windpipe and soft tissues of the neck due to being suddenly jerked in a different direction to which the calf is running
- bruising and broken ribs as the young animal is forced to the ground
- choking from being dragged along the ground.

The following images illustrate these risks.

Image 3 – Calf being choked whilst being forced to the ground



Image 4– Calf being violently yanked off the ground



With steer wrestling, the neck is violently twisted 180° forcing the animal to the ground. Risks associated with this include bruising, tissue damage and tendon/ligament strain. Some steers have also been killed due to a broken neck in this event.

Image 5 – Steer wrestling involves the neck being twisted violently



Some injuries may involve internal and subcutaneous bleeding which are not outwardly obvious but are likely to cause pain.

There is no independent collation and review of injury records (including rodeo training schools), thereby making it impossible to determine the true nature and prevalence of injuries.

For more information read the RSPCA knowledgebase article;

[What are the animal welfare issues with rodeos? – RSPCA Knowledgebase](#)

[What are the animal welfare issues with calf roping in rodeos? – RSPCA Knowledgebase](#)

[What are the animal welfare issues associated with bull riding? – RSPCA Knowledgebase](#)

3. Unnecessary harm

Sometimes animals are placed at risk or harmed but this should only occur when there is significant justification and the harm is minimal. In general, harm to animals will only be justified for very significant benefits such as improving human or animal health and/or safety. Therefore, the harm caused and associated risks with non-essential use of animals for entertainment is not acceptable.

4. Legal protection of animals used in rodeos

A fundamental aspect of animal welfare legislation is that no unnecessary harm is caused to animals. However, those involved in rodeos are protected from prosecution due to specific exemptions. This is recognised as being necessary due to the inhumane practices associated with rodeos.

Animal welfare legislation is inconsistent across states and territories for rodeos with Victoria having the most stringent laws, followed by South Australia. Both states having specific regulations pertaining to rodeos attached to animal welfare legislation. It is interesting to note that calf roping is effectively prohibited in Victoria and South Australia under animal welfare regulations with a minimum body weight requirement of 200kg for cattle (calves used for roping are 100-130kg). Rodeos are prohibited in the ACT. A recently published paper highlights the importance of sentience in animals and calves specifically, as well as the purpose of animal protection laws and inconsistencies in regulation of calf roping between Australian jurisdictions (Stonebridge et al 2022). The authors concluded that calf roping causes unnecessary harm which raises concerns regarding the adequacy of legal protection for calves in jurisdictions where calf roping is permitted.

The other main legal inconsistencies include electric prod use, requirement to obtain a rodeo permit and attendance by a veterinarian. Electric prodders are aversive to animals and should only be used when human or animal safety is jeopardised and as a last resort. It is generally accepted that electric prodders should never be used on horses due to their flighty nature and risk of injury. Prodders are not permitted to be used on horses in Victoria and Queensland. Prodders are not permitted in other circumstances including transporting horses – Australian Standards and Guidelines for the Land Transport of Livestock stipulates that prodders must not be used on horses (SB8.11) and yet they can be used on horses in rodeos in most jurisdictions (<http://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au/files/2015/12/Land-transport-of-livestock-Standards-and-Guidelines-Version-1.-1-21-September-2012.pdf>). There is no justification for prodders to be applied to animals used for the purpose of entertainment.

Even though there are welfare codes of practice pertaining to rodeos in some states, these are not legally enforceable.

For further information see RSPCA Knowledgebase article:

[What laws protect animals in rodeos? – RSPCA Knowledgebase](#)

The RSPCA does not believe that welfare risks can be mitigated through standards and guidelines as this can only be achieved through rodeos ceasing. To be effective, wherever rodeos occur, stringent welfare standards would need to be mandatory, contain appropriate provisions, be adequately monitored, impose adequate penalties and should be underpinned by strict regulations in all jurisdictions to safeguard against welfare risks. As a minimum, this would need to include a prohibition of calf roping and the use of flank straps and spurs.

5. Claims that roping device reduces impacts refuted

The Ropersmate™ Roping Device is claimed by the rodeo industry to act as a shock absorber, to lessen the force experienced by both the horse and calf, when the rope lasso tightens against the calf's neck prior to the rider leaving the horse to throw and tie off in rope and tie events. The RSPCA has examined the results of benchtop testing done on the Ropersmate™ device. The tests which have been conducted, do not involve assessing the direct force or impact on a calf running at speed in one direction who is then suddenly halted by a lasso around their neck and spun around approximately 180°. To accurately assess the true impact and therefore welfare of the calf being roped with the Ropersmate™ Roping Device, it is essential to consider the sensitivity and fragility of tissues in the neck area where the focus of the force is exerted.

A full clinical evaluation and internal medical imagery, comparing the external and internal injuries with and without the Ropersmate™ Roping Device would need to be undertaken. In addition to physical trauma and injury, additional evaluations should be undertaken to assess the emotional state of calves being roped as the roping event, which involves chasing and jerking is likely to induce pain, fear and acute stress resulting in a negative mental state. Without a comprehensive investigative study, claims regarding improved welfare by using the Ropersmate™ Roping Device are regarded as speculative.

6. Rodeos contradict good stock handling practices

Animals are not or should not be handled as demonstrated by rodeo events on any farm or station as part of normal husbandry practices. In fact, the cattle industry is strongly promoting low stress stock handling with many cattle stations having undertaken such training over the past couple of decades. For example, Meat and Livestock Australia heavily promote and support stockman training which clearly demonstrates that low stress stock handling is consistent with good animal welfare, good operator safety and good productivity – see below. Rodeo events do not reflect best practice cattle handling or horsemanship and calves are not roped, bulls are not ridden and steers are not wrestled as normal husbandry.

Low Stress Stockmanship Clinic | Rockhampton (<https://www.mla.com.au/news-and-events/events-and-workshops/low-stress-stockmanship-clinic--rockhampton/>)

A one day program presented by leading livestock handling educator and cattleman Boyd Holden, aimed to demonstrate the economic benefits of low stress stock handling and safety by design in stockyard facilities.

See guiding key principles of good stock handling and low-stress concepts in action that improve operator safety and minimise weight loss.

Achieve safe, calm and confident management of your livestock in the yards - see the “no-touch, no-noise” approach in action. Gain an understanding of your WHS compliancy and meeting animal welfare requirements.

Plus industry updates from Workplace Health & Safety QLD and MLA's Jarrod Lees, Meat Standards Australia, on safety by design in livestock handling facilities and the importance of low stress handling on eating quality.

7. Impact on children

As we try to engender compassion, respect and empathy for animals, rodeos completely erode this by showing that it is acceptable to incite fear in animals, use aversive equipment such as prodders, spurs and flank straps, and wrestle animals for entertainment. Children see animals being chased, kicked, thrown and choked with people cheering. This sends a strong message that not only is it deemed acceptable to treat animals in this way but that it is encouraged.

8. Conclusion

Councils are increasingly recognising their role in shaping and leading the way on social issues in their local community, including how animals are treated. Councils have an opportunity to align with community expectations and to be viewed as leaders in recognising the importance of animal welfare regarding the use of animals in tourism and entertainment. Discontinuing approval to use local show grounds or other council managed land does not prevent rodeos from seeking private properties to host events. The use of private land already happens in many parts of Australia. Rodeos are a tradition with an increasingly vulnerable social license. The focus and evidence on the negative impact rodeos have on animals is becoming stronger. Rodeos also do not reflect what happens on farms and so lacks legitimacy in terms of relevance to rural practices.

We hope that the information we have provided will assist in the council's decision making on the matter.

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APPENDIX 1 – RSPCA POLICY C08 RODEOS

- 8.1 RSPCA Australia is opposed to rodeos and rodeo schools because of the potential for significant injury, suffering or distress to the animals involved. The use of painful devices such as flank straps, spurs and electric prods contributes to suffering associated with this sport.
- 8.2 **Rodeo standards**
 - 8.2.1 Where rodeos and rodeo schools are permitted to be conducted, RSPCA Australia advocates the adoption of compulsory and enforced animal welfare standards and a registration and licensing system. Compliance with compulsory standards for the management, housing and transport of rodeo animals must be made a condition of licensing.
 - 8.2.2 The following events must be prohibited because of the inherent and significant risk of pain, injury, suffering or distress:

roping events involving immature animals, including calves under 200 kg
catching or roping of wild (undomesticated) animals, including brumby catching events
 - 8.2.3 A suitably qualified veterinarian must be onsite while a rodeo or rodeo school is being conducted to ensure prompt and appropriate veterinary care is provided to animals as required.