



Equus caballus



Bos taurus

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

RSPCA Victoria submission

2.8.2019



Ovis aries



Canis lupus familiaris



Felis catus

About RSPCA Victoria

RSPCA Victoria is a non-government, community-based charity that works to prevent cruelty to animals by actively promoting their care and protection. Since its establishment in 1871, and as a member of RSPCA Australia (the federation of eight state and territory organisations in Australia), the RSPCA has collectively become Australia's leading animal welfare charity.

Across the state, RSPCA Victoria's community services include work undertaken by our Inspectorate, Animal Care Centres, Clinics and Education teams. RSPCA Victoria operates Animal Care Centres across Victoria, providing refuge, care and new homes where possible to more than 20,000 animals every year. Our team of 27 Inspectors work to protect animals from cruelty and neglect, by enforcing the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, and by using powers given to us under Part 7 of the Domestic Animals Act as authorised by the Minister for Agriculture. They receive more than 10,000 animal cruelty reports every year, prosecuting offenders and rescuing animals from dangerous situations. Our Education team contributes to prevention strategies by influencing over 3,600 young people each year about the value and importance of animals in our lives.

RSPCA Victoria works to educate the community regarding animal welfare and works with government and industry to ensure the standard of animal welfare and care continues to improve.

Introduction

RSPCA Victoria appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture.

RSPCA Policy

The RSPCA federation advocates for the humane treatment of all farm animals (domesticated animals raised for the purpose of producing food and fibre). The RSPCA believes it is important to work with the farming community and other stakeholders to affect positive change and improve animal welfare throughout the lives of the animals, whether they be farmed in land-based or aquaculture systems.

The RSPCA encourages transparency throughout the supply chain to enable consumers to make informed choices about animal products.

Illegal activist activity

RSPCA Victoria does not support any kind of illegal activity in the pursuit of animal welfare objectives. RSPCA Victoria shares the agricultural industry's concerns about illegal entry onto farms and abattoirs by animal activists, including the disruption that this entry poses to farmers and their families' right to privacy. In addition, we acknowledge the risks this unlawful entry may pose to farm biosecurity.

RSPCA Victoria believes that animal welfare improvements can be achieved through productive engagement with key stakeholders and democratic processes rather than through illegal activities. As such, RSPCA Victoria continues to work with policy decision makers, government, regulators, industry groups and peak bodies to achieve our organisation's objective of ending cruelty to all animals and improving animal welfare.

Victoria already has criminal and biosecurity laws in place that can be applied in cases where activists illegally enter farming properties. In addition, research has demonstrated that the creation of new or harsher punishments in responding to crime does not reduce offending through the mechanism of general deterrence.^{1 2} Therefore, rather than responding to illegal activist activity with new or harsher criminal penalties, we believe that current laws are effective and can be enhanced through intelligence gathering and compliance monitoring, this includes supporting police with resources to enforce current laws.

Transparency and trust in Victorian Agriculture

RSPCA Victoria is additionally concerned about transparency in Victorian livestock food production and the treatment of Victorian livestock. Transparency in livestock production is a concern that is also shared by the Australian public. Futureye's report *Commodity or Sentient Being? Australia's shifting mindset on farm animal welfare*, which was commissioned by the Federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, found that an overwhelming majority (95%) of Australians are concerned about the treatment of farm animals, and consider animal welfare to be an issue in Australian agriculture.³ From a Victorian perspective, a 2012 study undertaken by rural sociologists Peter Parbery and Roger Wilkinson on behalf of the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (now Agriculture Victoria) found that the 'humane treatment of animals' was one of the three top issues of public concern about

¹ A.N Doob & C.M Webster, 'Sentence Severity and Crime: Accepting the Null Hypothesis', *Crime & Justice*, 143, (2003), 143-195.

² Sentencing Advisory Council, *Does Imprisonment Deter? A Review of the Evidence*, (2011), 1-28.

³ Futureye, *Commodity or Sentient being? Australia's shifting mindset on farm animal welfare* (2018), 1-103.

farming in Victoria.⁴ The other two were 'environmental sustainability' and the 'provision of a good living for farmers'. The study found that despite high levels of general support for farmers across all demographic segments, 32% of the 1,000 Victorians surveyed held a 'low level of trust' that farmers would address animal welfare concerns without coercion.⁵

Parbery and Wilkinson forewarned that if community trust in farming is not strengthened agricultural industries may suffer from a lack of 'social authorisation' leading to further protest and critical activism. If public concerns are left to persist, they could 'intensify to the point of supporting disruptive action aimed at stopping socially unacceptable farm practices.'⁶

These studies show that greater transparency from animal agriculture industries is needed, which sees industry groups and farmers engage with the community to address their concerns about farm animal welfare and build community trust. This is further supported by the study 'Opening the Doors to Agriculture: The Effect of Transparent Communication on Attitude', which 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.⁷ In addition, 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.⁸ 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.⁹

Therefore, RSPCA Victoria believes that transparency and communication of agricultural practices at all stages of the food production process can be an effective way of increasing consumer confidence and understanding. Strategies for promoting transparency could include clearer product labelling, more rigorous third-party auditing, the installation of closed-circuit television cameras in animal agriculture facilities and abattoirs or the development of farm open-days and visitation

⁴ P Parbery and R Wilkinson, 'Victorians' Attitudes to Farming' (2012) Department of Primary Industries, Victoria

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Ibid.

programs. Government also has a 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.

Conclusion

RSPCA Victoria believes that current criminal and biosecurity legislation is adequate. Rather than introducing new legislation, enhancing enforcement of current legislation through intelligence gathering, compliance monitoring and police resourcing should be explored. As it has been proven that stricter regulation and penalties do not deter activists, it is important to focus on the issues that are driving the activist behaviour to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Research has shown that greater transparency improves public attitudes and confidence in industry treating animals more humanely. We believe that Government, as well as industry has a role to play in promoting this transparency by ensuring robust animal welfare systems are in place.