

Stop the sheep trade in the northern summer, veterinarians say

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The live sheep trade has received a fresh blow, with the Australian Veterinary Association opposing voyages in the northern summer, between May and October.

The veterinarians' stand prompted a call from the Western Australian government for the federal government to make a quick decision on the northern summer trade – already underway – “to ensure any pause can be properly managed”.

The government next week receives the report of the inquiry into the summer trade that it ordered after footage of appalling onboard conditions was shown on TV. Federal Agriculture Minister David Littleproud has already flagged tougher penalties for breaches of regulations.

In Israel, a petition against live sheep shipments has been signed by 60 leading rabbis. The Times of Israel [reported](#) late last week that the petition says: “We were shocked to discover the harsh facts about the great suffering of calves and sheep, God’s creatures, sent by ships from Australia and Europe to be slaughtered in Israel”.

“The causing of such extreme suffering to animals solely to satisfy our desire for fresh meat is not the way of Torah, and it is not human morality to permit such harsh cruelty to animals.” The petition called for the shipments to end.

The Greens are discussing with the crossbench and Labor a private member’s bill for the phasing out of the trade over two years, which would be put to the Senate.

In a highly-detailed submission to the government review, the AVA says that irrespective of the stocking density on ships “sheep on live export voyages to the Middle East during May to October cannot be recommended.”

The submission of the AVA - the professional organisation representing veterinarians - evaluates the current science relating to the summer trade, looking at the core issues of space allocation and heat stress.

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It says that while animal welfare science has advanced since the trade started “the current standards do not reflect these advances.

“Importantly, animal welfare science relates to the physical and mental state of an animal, and recognises that animals are sentient. Changes that are made should be based on ensuring both the physical and mental welfare needs of exported animals throughout the entire journey, and not solely restricted to addressing mortalities”, the submission says.

“In 2018, we know that ensuring good animal welfare means providing animals with all the elements required to ensure their health, physiological fitness and a sense of positive individual wellbeing.”

The submission recommends an increase in the space allocation for each animal of at least 30% for sheep weighing 40-60 kilograms – the weight range of the typical sheep sent to the Middle East. This is a much bigger increase than the industry has canvassed.

Meanwhile Labor, after announcing last week that in government it would phase out the trade, continues to refuse to say how long that would take. Federal agriculture spokesman Joel Fitzgibbon said it would be “wrong for me to put a timeline on it”.

Fitzgibbon said he would still like to secure a bipartisan approach – even though the government last week condemned Labor’s phase out promise as reckless. “We want deep and meaningful reform, but we want reform that is not going to [be] overturned by a future government many years down the track,” Fitzgibbon told Sky.

The WA government’s [position](#) is that it doesn’t want sheep exports ended but believes it may not be possible for the northern summer trade to meet welfare standards.

The WA Agriculture Minister, Alannah MacTiernan, said the AVA “backs what our government has been saying for some time – that it may not be possible to keep exporting during the Middle East summer at anywhere near the same levels as we have previously.

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"Industry will need time to prepare for a reduction or pause over those summer months – the federal government must announce its plans for the northern summer as soon as possible," she said.

She said the WA government "will continue working with meat processors and talking to markets and governments in Kuwait and Qatar to ensure the best possible outcome for WA farmers".

Liberal backbencher Sussan Ley on Tuesday will give notice to the parliamentary clerks office of her intention to move a private member's bill to phase out the trade. It would be introduced at the next private member's bill time in the House of Representatives, which is on May 21. Ley on Monday was having talks with other MPs interested in the issue.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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