

Considerations and approaches to animal welfare policy

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It gives me great pleasure to be here at this Third OIE Global Conference on Animal Welfare in Kuala Lumpur to speak about the importance of animal welfare from a policy perspective. My thanks to the OIE, the Malaysian Government and the conference organisers for inviting the Australian Government to participate. And my apologies that Deputy Secretary of the Australian Department of Agriculture, Phillip Glyde, is not able to attend. The Australian Government is pleased to be supporting this event.

Animal welfare is an unavoidably complex policy problem – which is undoubtedly why we have hundreds of people here today at this conference from many different countries.

What I would like to do today is to

- give some perspective on the challenges that animal welfare policy poses for governments, industries, communities and individuals;
- provide Australian support for the OIE's approach to tackling animal welfare at the international level; and
- discuss the approach that the Australian Government has taken to the challenges of animal welfare policy in recent years.
- When we approach the issue of animal welfare we do so from a number of perspectives that are influenced by evidence, by values and by attitudes about how animals ought to be treated. This is of course a highly contested area that's influenced by scientific, economic, religious and cultural factors. And this diversity means that there is a wide spectrum of views on what is 'good' animal welfare policy. Different stakeholders can have very different views of the nature of the policy problem.
- The challenge is to design ethical policies to provide for the five welfare domains in a positive manner, while recognising this diversity of views.
- Animal welfare is not a stand alone issue – it goes hand in hand with animal health, animal production issues and food safety concerns. Governments need to take account of animals in their living environment, which means consideration of issues around animal welfare, human welfare, biodiversity and consumer choice. Decisions need to consider impacts on all these elements around the ethical principles of justice, fairness and well-being – as applied often in the ethical matrix concept.
- Animal welfare is more than a technical issue – it's a social issue where solutions involve coordinated action by governments, NGOs, businesses, including farmers, and individuals.
- Complicating the animal welfare policy environment is that some of the views expressed most strongly, and that are often influential with the general community, are not necessarily founded in good science. And that can widen the gap between interested stakeholders, such as communities and farmers in the case of production animals, and make it more difficult to derive acceptable solutions. Most consumers and the wider community have limited understanding of farming and livestock production but are increasingly interested in the origin of their food and whether the animals it was derived from had a 'good' life.
- Ensuring that improved animal welfare practices lead to 'better' agricultural and farm outcomes is an important means of driving change in the production sector. But bearing in mind that improving animal welfare outcomes can be costly, governments need to provide a stable and transparent environment where industry can be confident about the pace of change required and invest appropriately.
- There is also an important international trade dimension to animal welfare – trade in animals and animal products can be a driver of improvements in animal welfare where importing countries demand increases in standards; but it can also be a barrier to trade where countries impose higher than international standards.

- We are also challenged by how to measure animal welfare. There is substantial effort around the world focussed on developing animal welfare indicators. In the production sector, most welfare assurance and assessment schemes focus on how well farms comply with the given standards and don't make a scientific evaluation of welfare. To measure welfare appropriately, we need to focus, as the OIE standards advise, on outcomes-based indicators.
- Our communities expect strong laws and regulations to ensure animals will be treated humanely and responsibly. But laws alone are not sufficient. Certainly in the production sector, industries need to maintain a social licence to operate – and that must be founded on social legitimacy, credibility and trust from the community.
 - Without it, communities put pressure on governments for more regulatory control or use market pressures to boycott products and practices.
- Governments and industry need to be forward looking and position themselves to respond to emerging animal welfare concerns, and to consider public opinion. Industry needs to demonstrate continuous improvement to keep in touch with community expectations and to be transparent about its activities.
- This is becoming more important as the contemporary media play a major role in driving public opinion. The availability of information through the internet and social media has made it simple and rapid to distribute information. Changing views about animal welfare are being driven by new communication channels – the use of social media is particularly effective in campaigning for change. Moreover, a problem in one country can rapidly become world news. What was acceptable 20 or 30 years ago because it was out of the public eye is no longer unchallenged. Painful husbandry practices, live animal exports and slaughter procedures are examples in Australia.
- Regulated and voluntary changes to production processes have occurred steadily over recent times in an effort to meet changing community expectations about animal welfare. However, these changes tend to occur very slowly and often more slowly than changes in community expectations. Rapid, or revolutionary, change occurs often out of crisis situations. With the internet and social media we may have 'revolutions' in animal welfare more frequently.
- Even where there's a political will to regulate, governments as regulators may lack capacity to ensure effective implementation. The value of even the best laws is undermined if we have limited capacity to monitor compliance and enforce them.

OIE

The OIE is driving the continuous improvement of animal welfare standards at the global and regional levels.

The OIE recognises that animal welfare is an important core issue and that progress will be incremental and in line with the socioeconomic contexts in its member countries. Improvements in animal welfare will require cultural and behavioural change, but OIE's model of engagement is achieving progress in the understanding of these challenges, and is delivering practical outcomes.

One of the OIE's key achievements, of course, is the development of the science-based international animal welfare standards in the Terrestrial Animal Health Code.

Implementation of these standards is the responsibility of individual member countries. But the OIE has supported countries to establish the necessary underpinnings of good animal welfare policy, including contemporary legislation, improved veterinary education and training, and defined competencies for graduating veterinarians.

The network of collaborating centres on animal welfare science and the promotion of twinning, is helping to build regional technical expertise.

The incorporation of animal welfare into the Performance of Veterinary Services tool has been an important step in promoting animal welfare as a fundamental issue.

The establishment of country focal points has assisted OIE's efforts to promote the implementation of its animal welfare standards, and to assist members to raise awareness about animal welfare in their countries.

We have seen practical achievements from these OIE coordinated efforts, such as the development of regional strategies. The first such strategy for Asia, the Far East and Oceania was endorsed by the general assembly in 2008 and recognised as a model for other regions of the world.

Although private standards for animal welfare have, and are, being implemented, globally agreed and scientifically underpinned OIE standards should form the basis of national animal welfare legislation and practice.

As a global player in animal production and trade, Australia is fully supportive of the OIE standards and of the collaborative approaches used to reach agreement.

Australia's animal welfare position

Improving and promoting animal welfare is an important objective of the Australian Government.

Australia's policy approach to animal welfare domestically is articulated in the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy – or the AAWS.

Australia recognises that animals are socially, culturally and economically important. Animal and related industries generate many billions of dollars of economic activity and tens of thousands of jobs across rural, regional and urban Australia.

Australia's position on animal welfare can be summarised as 'reflecting the ethical imperative and social expectations that any use of animals for the benefit of humans should minimise suffering of the animals involved ... it extends beyond survival to also consider the quality of an animal's life'. Consistent with the OIE and the five freedoms / domains we expect more than avoidance of wilful ill-treatment of animals and consider there to be a positive duty of care. This is reflected in contemporary Australian animal welfare legislation.

Australia's Animal Welfare Strategy provides a national framework for continuous improvement in animal welfare. The framework identifies priorities, helps to coordinate stakeholder actions and improves consistency across all animal use sectors, not just the production sector. Australia is one of the few countries that has a national strategy for improving the welfare of the millions of animals kept for both economic and domestic purposes.

The AAWS has created opportunities to share knowledge and to debate how the welfare of animals can be improved across all sectors. There's a commitment to diversity of stakeholder representation, to ensure and equitable balance between the various stakeholder groups.

Key oversight of the Strategy is provided by a high level, expert based Advisory Committee – chaired by Dr Gardner Murray who will be known to many of you through his engagement with the OIE – and which delivers advice to the Minister of Agriculture on animal welfare issues of strategic and national importance.

The strategy is now in its second implementation phase and some of its achievements to date include:

- Having a solid framework for stakeholder participation;
- Identifying elements to be made consistent in the legislation of our eight states and territories and getting agreement from these jurisdictions to implement them;
- Reviewing animal welfare issues and capacity across six animal use sectors – livestock and production animals; companion animals; aquatic animals; animals used in research and teaching; animals used for work, recreation and entertainment; and native, introduced and feral animals – as well as in the areas of communications, education and training, research and development;
- Endorsing a policy to move from voluntary codes of practice for the welfare of livestock to national standards and guidelines, with greater consistency in regulation; and
- Agreeing to extend standards and guidelines to non-production animals.

Important to the success of the Strategy has been political commitment at the highest level – all relevant Ministers from the eight States and Territories and the national Minister have endorsed the AAWS through the Standing Council on Primary Industries.

The Australian Government invests about one million dollars a year directly in the AAWS, which is used for specific initiatives that address priority issues.

The Strategy is proving to be an effective framework for engaging all interested parties to deliver agreed national goals and objectives. It also responds to the government's recognition that improving animal welfare outcomes is in the public interest.

Australia also seeks to engage actively in international animal welfare forums, at the level of government, industry and non-government organisations, to exchange ideas, share expertise, develop networks and partnerships, support the development and adoption of international animal welfare guidelines, and articulate Australia's perspective. That's why our participation in the OIE and in the Regional Animal Welfare Strategy is so important to us.

ESCAS

One particular animal welfare policy issue that the Australian Government has dealt with over the past 18 months has involved the live animal export trade – and I'd like to reflect for a couple of minutes on how we responded to that issue, because it involved some of the key policy challenges of animal welfare, as well as others that were new, and certainly took us into new territory in dealing with them.

In May last year the Australian Government was confronted in a national television program with evidence of what it considered serious issues of animal welfare in one of our key live export markets. The community concern, fanned by conventional and social media, was so strong that it led to serious questioning of the export industry's social licence to operate. It immediately brought into the spotlight the very different views of exporters, the livestock production industry and those that support or are economically dependent on that industry, and the animal welfare and community groups that are opposed to the live trade.

The government reacted quickly by suspending the trade to that market for a short period while it developed, in conjunction with stakeholders, a new system of regulation that makes the exporter responsible for animal welfare right through the supply chain until the point of processing in the importing country.

Welfare issues associated with the live trade were not new, but until then the system of regulation had focussed on ensuring that the animals were healthy and fit to travel when they boarded the vessel in Australia, and that they met the importing country's requirements.

The new system – known as the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System, or ESCAS – is different because it recognises that animal welfare is fundamental to the sustainability of the live trade.

Under ESCAS, exporters are only granted an approval to export if they demonstrate that:

- they have control of the animals throughout the supply chain;
- they can account for all animals throughout the supply chain;
- and that OIE animal welfare standards will be implemented up to the point of processing.

Consistent with the Code, the standards are evaluated on an outs basis to allow for different approaches in different countries.

Exporters are also required to demonstrate compliance with the system through independent auditing and reporting.

Under ESCAS, the Australian Government is not regulating in another country – we have no right to do that – but we are regulating the Australian exporter through to the end of the process.

ESCAS has been phased in and 99 per cent of our feeder and slaughter live trade is now covered by the new regulations, and all trade will be included by the end of this year. The trade in breeder animals is not covered by ESCAS.

It would be naive to think that there will be no further of animal welfare issues in the live trade because of ESCAS. In fact there have been a number of reported incidents in several countries. But what's important is that we now have a system that's more transparent than before and a regulatory process that's able to respond to animal welfare concerns when they occur. I believe Australia is the only country to have developed a rigorous, OIE-consistent system to improve animal welfare as a condition of the live trade.

Measuring the welfare outcomes of ESCAS is difficult but our information to date does show that there have been improvements in animal handling and slaughter practices. Some abattoir operators also speak of vastly improved productivity in their enterprises, including greater throughput and higher profits – and we should never underestimate the power of these economic factors to drive animal welfare improvements. Our intention is to continue to assess the effects of ESCAS over time and to make all performance data publicly available.

The Australian Government is backing up ESCAS with the provision of \$15 m of funding to encourage investment in live export supply chains and to support training in animal welfare in eligible countries. The OIE is delivering much of this training through the Improved Animal Welfare Program.

Incidents such as these in the livestock export trade reinforce that animal welfare is important to the public, and clearly demonstrate the importance of being prepared to respond to community concern, in both a commercial and a policy sense.

Conclusion

To conclude I would like to reiterate a few simple points:

- that animal welfare is a complex and challenging policy problem where deriving ethical solutions requires the understanding and balancing of many interests – it's a joint responsibility between governments, industry, welfare organisations and the community
- that making real advances in animal welfare is a medium to long term activity that can involve significant cultural and behavioural change;
- improving animal welfare internationally will require strategic partnerships, particularly at the regional level. OIE's promotion of regional animal welfare strategies will provide a platform for cooperation by governments, industry and international organisations to work toward agreed common goals;
- given the experience the OIE has gained in developing animal welfare strategies at the regional level, perhaps it's time to ask whether it's now appropriate to use that experience to develop an overarching global animal welfare strategy;
- and, remembering, of course, that while the OIE is taking a leadership role in animal welfare internationally, implementation is not the OIE's responsibility – it's the responsibility of each member country and its citizens.
- Australia will continue to do as it has in the past to support and fund efforts to improve animal welfare and will continue its commitment to work constructively in relevant forums, including with the OIE, to achieve these outcomes.

I wish the OIE and the organisers a very successful conference and thank you again for inviting me to speak today.
