

**Submission
No 54**

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE PHASE-OUT OF
AUSTRALIAN LIVE SHEEP EXPORTS BY SEA ON NEW
SOUTH WALES**

Name: Dr Mike Rubenach

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Dear Members of the Inquiry,

I am Dr Mike Rubenach, formerly an academic geologist but also a person with deep-rooted ties to the farming community. I grew up on a sheep farm in Tasmania and have maintained a close connection with it, making occasional visits and lending a hand to my younger brother at various times, including recently over Christmas 23-24. It is in this context that I am writing to you today, to express my concerns about the live sheep export trade.

The live sheep export trade, as it currently operates, poses significant issues when it comes to maintaining acceptable standards of animal welfare. Despite recent regulatory reforms, the persistent problems relating to animal welfare within the trade have not been resolved. In fact, these reforms have only served to underscore the depth of these issues.

A particular concern is the way Australian Merino sheep, which are not well-suited to high humidity environments, suffer from prolonged heat stress. This occurs on at least 60% of voyages, as they move through hot, humid equatorial regions before reaching the extreme heat of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf regions. With the ongoing effects of climate change increasing extreme temperatures, the risk of major catastrophic disasters at sea is set to rise.

Once our sheep reach the Middle East, they are slaughtered without stunning, causing them extreme pain, fear and distress. This is in stark contrast to methods used in Australia, where sheep are stunned before slaughter, sparing them the conscious experience of the neck cut and the bleed out process. This includes Halal accredited slaughter for meat exports to the Middle East.

I would argue that Australia can contribute to improved animal welfare standards globally without participating in live sheep exports. By engaging in international forums such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and international trade agreement negotiations, we can encourage nations to improve their standards, resulting in widespread, long-term benefits to animal welfare.

Public sentiment supports this position. A national poll conducted by McCrindle Research in 2022 found that 78% of Australians supported a phase-out of the trade. Subsequent polling in Western Australia, where most of the trade takes place, found that 71% of residents, including 69% in rural and regional areas, backed the phase-out in May 2023.

The concern for animal welfare is so deeply entrenched in our community that exposure to images of animal suffering in the live export trade has been shown to cause considerable emotional distress and feelings of helplessness. Researchers from the University of Queensland recommended that future media coverage should offer contact details for counselling and mental health support, highlighting the significant psychological impact of this issue.

Looking at the economic aspects, interstate trade in sheep from Western Australia to Eastern states has been inconsistent, with only three of the last 13 years seeing volumes over 300,000 head. As these volumes are distributed between South Australia, Victoria and NSW, the percentage increase in supply diminishes. Even in peak years, interstate trade accounts for less

than 10% of the average annual sheep slaughter volumes in NSW. The main determinant for farm gate sheep prices is international commodity prices for lamb and mutton, since Australia exports over 65% of the sheep meat it produces.

Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that the NSW sheep industry will suffer notable impacts due to the phase-out of live sheep exports. The 2023 Independent Panel on the Phase Out of Live Sheep Exports concluded that an increase in interstate trade between Western Australia and NSW following the phase-out is unlikely due to high freight costs, making it an unsustainable and unreliable market for Western Australian producers.

From a personal perspective, my early experiences on the farm, witnessing sheep suffer as they were killed without stunning, deeply troubled me. I have a fondness for animals and find it unacceptable for Australian sheep to be dispatched in such a manner in foreign countries.

In conclusion, I strongly urge you to consider the economic, social and moral implications of continuing with the live sheep export trade. The welfare of our livestock, the sentiments of our people, and the reputation of our country are at stake.

Regards, Dr Mike Rubenach