

Report on the online questionnaire

Inquiry into the provisions of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Amendment (Restrictions on Stock Animal Procedures) Bill 2019

As part of its inquiry into the provisions of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Amendment (Restrictions on Stock Animal Procedures) Bill 2019, Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Industry launched an online questionnaire to encourage public participation in an efficient and accessible way. This was the primary means by which community members were encouraged to share their views on the bill.

The questionnaire was not intended as a statistically valid, random survey. Respondents self-selected in choosing to participate. This means that respondents were not a representative sample of the NSW population, but rather interested members of the public who volunteered their time to have a say. It should be noted that some of the participants in the questionnaire resided outside of New South Wales.

The online questionnaire was open from 23 June 2020 to 31 July 2020. The committee received responses from 13,076 individual participants. This report summarises the responses expressed by participants and provides a sample of views on the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Amendment (Restrictions on Stock Animal Procedures) Bill 2019. These responses will inform the committee's views throughout the inquiry and may be used in the inquiry report.

Questions asked

The questionnaire comprised of three main questions, including a question on the respondent's position on the bill and two open ended questions regarding:

- the reasons for their position on the bill
- any other comments to explain their views on the bill.

The questions are reproduced at Appendix 1.

Responses to questions

Question 2: What is your position on the bill?

Question 2 was presented in a multiple choice format and participants were able to choose from the following options: 'Support', 'Neutral/Undecided' or 'Oppose'.

- The vast majority of participants (89.87 per cent, or 11,751 respondents) supported the bill to ban the Mules procedure on sheep (hereafter, mulesing) and to require the use of pain relief in certain procedures involving stock animals.
- A total of 1,159 participants (8.86 per cent) indicated their opposition to the bill in answer to Question 2. However, upon further analysis of their responses to other questions in the questionnaire, 445 of these participants expressed support for the banning of mulesing, in line with the purpose of the bill. The number of participants who indicated opposition to the bill across their responses to all questions was 714 (5.46 per cent).
- A total of 166 participants (1.27 per cent) indicated their neutrality or chose not to answer this question.

Samples of the individual comments made to support these views are outlined below.

Question 3: In relation to the previous question, please explain your position on the bill.

Support for the bill

Many participants expressed support for the proposed banning of mulesing for reasons of animal welfare. Common themes in these responses included an opposition to animal cruelty and concerns about the pain that sheep experience as a result of the procedure. Some participants also noted that the provision of pain relief was an insufficient basis on which to allow the practice to continue:

- 'I believe mulesing is a totally unnecessary, barbaric procedure that has no place in farming practices in the 21st century. It's time Australia got on board with other enlightened countries that have abandoned this inherently cruel practice.'
- 'Animal do not have enough rights. They are sentient beings that deserve to be treated with dignity. They feel emotion, fear, pain and grief just like us humans do. And yet we wouldn't dare treat our species in the same way. It's time for change.'
- 'I believe that sheep should be cared for in every possible way and never treated cruelly. Sheep feel pain and mulesing has a lasting effect on them when performed without pain relief. Would you do this to a human? No you wouldn't, nor should you do it to a sheep.'
- 'The welfare of farm animals is almost entirely in our hands. My thinking is that if we cannot produce wool without cruelty, then we have stop producing wool. Producers and consumers of wool have an ethical responsibility to farm animals and to ourselves to take cruelty out of the process. This is a situation of "the sooner the better" so I support the bill unreservedly.'
- 'Mulesing is a very painful procedure, yet is legal everywhere in Australia. The wool industry has long been aware of the negative animal welfare impacts of mulesing, but has failed to reform the practice or implement alternatives. Updating the law merely to require pain relief (as in Victoria) is not enough, as too hard to enforce, and the types of pain relief allowed may not be effective or long-lasting. The practice should be completely banned as the Bill proposes. The industry will cope as some wool farmers have already stopped mulesing.'
- 'I support an outright ban on mulesing as requiring pain relief is a half-way measure that will fail to protect lambs and sheep. The standard products do not provide sufficient pain relief. As some farmers have already stopped using the mules procedure, a ban is the only logical solution to this significant animal welfare problem. I would support a higher penalty to reflect the seriousness of the pain inflicted on an animal by the mules procedure.'
- 'It is time that the necessary actions be taken to protect farm animal welfare, in particular the welfare of our sheep - by banning the practice of mulesing of commercially farmed sheep. It was established internationally using scientific standards that animals have a conscience and experience pain in terms which humans understand - as we experience. We cannot regard Australia to be a civilized or ethical country unless we take steps to ensure decency and morality in our farming practices.'

On the specific issue of mulesing, some participants expressed support for its prohibition on the basis of bringing New South Wales into line with international jurisdictions:

- 'I am against the mulesing practise used in lambs, it is cruel and no pain relief is provided. It's been banned in many overseas countries and Australia should follow suit and help protect these animals from infection and death caused by this cruel unnecessary procedure.'
- 'Farm animals are sentient beings, we should not be deliberately inflicting pain on them. This practice is banned in civilised countries, and major European companies/retailers will not use Australian merino wool unless we meet their animal husbandry standards.'
- 'Other countries have led the way in finding more effective and humane practices to combat flystrike and have rightly outlawed mulesing. It is time NSW did the same. The conducting of painful (and sometimes unnecessary) procedures on livestock without analgesic relief is not acceptable in a civilised society. I support this bill.'
- 'Mulesing is an extremely cruel and painful practice which should be banned in Australia. There was a plan to phase out this practice but that has not happened. New Zealand has banned mulesing and many European retailers and consumers will now only buy wool from a non mulesed sheep. More humane treatment of all animals should be a priority for all farmers and consumers.'

A majority of participants who supported the bill's proposed ban on mulesing also agreed with the need for mandatory pain relief for certain procedures involving stock animals:

- 'Animals should be afforded pain relief for practises that cause pain. This bill is a step in the right direction towards ending unnecessary procedures and inflicting pain onto animals in the farming industry.'
- 'I would like the government to ban mulesing of sheep and make pain relief mandatory for all invasive procedures on all farm animals.'
- 'The legislation would ban mulesing of lambs, and would require pain relief for farm animals during castration, de-horning, and tail docking, as well as mulesing, under punishment of fines and imprisonment for non-compliance. I am in support of a bill that gives more and better protection to farm animals, from painful procedures. Having grown up on a farm, and lived on a farm, I know that the farm animals suffer pain when these procedures are done to them. Animals do not deserve to have to suffer pain.'
- 'We need restrictions placed on livestock procedures that cause pain. These procedures are unethical and if performed by the general public on their domestic pets, would be considered torture. Currently, a double standard means we are comfortable with cruelty to sentient livestock but not similarly intelligent animals, simply (and illogically) just because they live in our homes.'

Opposition to the bill

For participants who opposed the bill, a common view was that mulesing is an acceptable and necessary practice for prevention of flystrike in sheep. Many of these respondents described the painful nature of death by flystrike for sheep and expressed the view that mulesing was a better option in comparison:

- 'Mulesing is a far better option for Australia than being eaten alive from flystrike (maggots).'
- 'Mulesing is an important part of preventing flystrike in merino sheep. Anyone that thinks they have an opinion on this procedure needs to see for themselves the results of flystrike on unmulsed sheep first hand.'
- 'Mulesing is a one-off procedure, it is highly effective at long term fly strike reduction and it underpins the other fly strike prevention "tools". Thus, it is particularly important that mulesing be retained until a suitable replacement is found (and proven). Farmers do not do it for fun, if it only helped a bit, we would not do it. While it is painful at the time, once healed there is no more pain from the procedure, and it is far better than being eaten alive.'
- 'The practice of mulesing is absolutely critical in the humane treatment of sheep. Mulesing prevents fly strike around the breach area, which, in turn, prevents many sheep from extremely unpleasant and extraordinarily painful deaths. The mulesing of even grown sheep, though initially painful, prevents subsequent death. I have never heard of a death as a result of mulesing. Anyone who has seen a sheep die from fly strike would never wish to see such an event ever again!! Simply, "mulesing saves lives!!'

A number of responses from sheep farmers and members of the wool industry raised broader concerns around the effect a ban on mulesing may have on the wool industry. Many of these respondents also stressed that animal welfare concerns were already a significant consideration in farming practices and that owners of livestock were best placed to determine best practice regarding their stock:

- 'As a Merino producer in the Hilltops region of NSW, I strongly believe this bill will put an immense stress on the Merino industry, particularly now whilst the country is in a state of rebuilding our sheep flock as a direct result of the last 2 years of drought. Breeding bare breech sheep in an area of NSW that historically has a high carrying capacity of livestock is simply not a good business decision. Top producers are already using (and have been since their introduction) pain relief for mulesing and other related activities at marking time. The industry have been looking for alternatives since the introduction of mulesing yielding no results. Not mulesing a sheep will inevitably put that animal over its lifetime through far more pain and suffering than through surgery with pain relief as a young lamb.'
- 'I am a 4th generation merino sheep breeder in Central NSW. I do not support a ban on mulesing at any date. My family and I are passionate about animal welfare, and we firmly believe that the discomfort endured during mulesing is nothing compared to the unendurable suffering that many unmulsed sheep endure from the sheep blowfly. Bear in mind that chemical options are not the answer to replace mulesing due to increasing resistance to their mode of action. We believe in an integrated approach to blowfly strike prevention. Ending mulesing will result in poorer animal welfare outcomes over the life of these important animals.'

- 'As a farmer of sheep I support best practice. We use pain relief at mulesing. If we are not allowed to mules lambs the choice will be more crutching required to prevent fly strike plus having to use far more chemicals to prevent fly strike. Most consumers of meat & wool require little or no chemical residues & as the farmer who would have to apply the chemicals I do my utmost to limit exposure to chemicals to myself & my sheep. If anybody that opposes mulesing has to come & treat a flyblown sheep they would understand very quickly why mulesing is done. Treating a flyblown sheep is the worst job I have to do on my farm.'
- 'There is nothing more distressing than animals fly struck and dying from fly strike. Whilst mulesing is a surgical procedure it aids in prevention of potential livestock loss and death of sheep... As a farmer I am always concerned about the welfare of my livestock and making good decisions about all aspects of my business is essential. Restricting management practises does not ensure the best animal welfare outcomes.'

Some participants who opposed the proposed ban on mulesing called for the practice to be continued with the administration of pain relief being made mandatory:

- 'I agree with the idea of mandatory administration of pain relief for all sheep aspects which involve pain, however I do not support the banning of mulesing as it protects the sheep from infection and fly strike. ... If you mules correctly with pain relief and at a young age the pain is only little and only for a short time as they get over the pain within a day because they have the support of their mothers and the pain relief. Some people believe it's a gruesome and in humane thing to do to sheep. I believe mulesing is a mandatory procedure when done correctly and with pain relief and is a key aspect for survival and prosperity of a sheep and its overall well-being and health.'
- 'Banning mulesing is not the solution for good animal welfare outcomes as it is a very complex issue that cannot be viewed as a binary issue. Mulesing is a once-for-life procedure, which in many circumstances, when performed with pain relief, is the best thing that a woolgrower can do in terms of animal welfare for particular sheep. Banning mulesing would lead to perverse animal welfare outcomes for many sheep who are not 'plain' enough in the breech area, which would ultimately lead to high levels of flystrike - a very cruel outcome. Pain relief for mulesing must be made mandatory under law, but there should not be a ban on the practice.'

Further on the topic of pain relief, some participants indicated they did not support the administration of pain relief for other stock practices being made mandatory. Many identified specific procedures they believed didn't require pain relief, including castration, tail docking and ear tagging:

- 'I agree to the use of pain relief for mulesing but not for the others.'
- 'I do not support the need for pain relief for castration or tail docking. I don't believe pain relief for either of these procedures would make any difference to the wellbeing of the animal. And I believe trials will show that. I think it's just more chemicals and substances that we don't need to be injecting into lamb for human consumption. I believe dehorning should have pain relief.'
- 'I am not opposed to pain relief but not for all procedures. Dehorning is preventable by breeding polled animals. Ear tagging and ear marking would be totally impractical. Mulesing is probably the only procedure which could help. I have mulsed thousands of sheep in the past and cannot attribute a single death to mulesing. I have seen a sheep die of shock after mulesing about sixty years ago. I would not know if pain relief would have averted this death.'
- 'Pain relief for tasks such as ear tagging is not feasible. Many breeders tag their livestock with NLIS just before loading for sale. Using pain relief as part of this process means the animals will be within a withholding period and no longer eligible for target markets. Administering pain relief can also add to distress for the animal for minor activities as well as adding risk for the farmer.'
- 'I agree with pain relief for mulesing, tail docking and marking with a knife. I do not agree with pain relief for ear marking and tagging.'

Question 4: Do you have any other comments on the bill?

In response to this question, participants generally reiterated their position on the bill:

- 'The bill does not go far enough, and is only one small part of making the industry competitive and sustainable. Other practices, including tail docking, and lamb marking without appropriate anaesthetic, need to be outlawed also, and additional practices, such as occur in lambing and the production of fine wool, need to be regulated by an independent and powerful body. Also, there is need for the date at which commencement of the enforcement of the Bill is set to be brought forward to as early date as practicable. Alternative practices are not difficult, expensive or time-consuming to adapt to, and require only reasonably minimal re-education and re-training. There is no sense in delay.'
- 'I think it is time to stop talking about these well-known practices and issues and do the right thing to ensure there is proper animal welfare protection for farm animals. It is time to act and support this bill.'
- 'We cannot pretend this practice is humane. We cannot pretend animals aren't suffering. Self-regulation doesn't work. It's high time our government showed leadership for humane practices for all animals. We must pass this bill.'
- 'There are more humane ways to deal with our precious animals who have feelings, feel pain and distress and it is time that in this day and age pain relief is utilised at all times.'
- 'As a veterinarian I am acutely aware of the need to provide pain relief and that mulesing is a barbaric practice. I understand the issues with fly strike but crutching and regular inspection of animals would remedy the need for mulesing.'
- 'First and foremost- end this practice. It's well established there are other more effective ways to stop fly infestations in sheep that simply mutilating their bodies. Secondly, more oversight of the livestock industry and a questioning of procedures that often go back hundreds of years and simply continue due to cost factors and a mindset 'it's what had always been done' just is no longer acceptable.'
- 'The proposed time span before the ban will not allow producers to develop less fly-sustainable stock. The ban appears to fail to acknowledge the variation across the observable phenotype of different sheep breeds. It also fails to acknowledge the presence of a major flystrike in the past decade to support the idea that producers are ready to have mulesing unavailable to them.'
- 'As for 'the administration of pain relief in certain procedures involving stock animals; and for other purposes', there are already analgesics available to farmers, who are able to use these at their discretion for the best possible health outcomes and best practices for their animals. This is the way it should remain! Farmers who are still in business after, drought, bushfires, COVID and political interference, are certainly leaders in their profession worldwide, producing the cleanest, greenest product and know more than most how to look after their animals.'
- 'Woolgrowers don't wish to hurt their sheep as it is counter-productive. Generally growers are slowly changing breeding tactics to achieve plainer sheep so as to reduce reliance on surgical practices. This cannot be done in three or even five years. The bill is impractical.'
- 'I oppose the current bill as I believe it will heavily impact on the high standard of animal husbandry currently undertaken in the sheep industry. Whilst the bill is targeting mulesing in the first instance I feel that there is a broader impact on other necessary animal husbandry actions. Whilst mulesing in its current form is unpopular to the broader community and consumers, mandatory pain relief, new technology and ongoing genetic selection are all alternatives that the industry strongly supports and is actively pursuing.'

Conclusion

The online questionnaire has been a valuable tool to efficiently gather the views of interested individuals on the issues raised in terms of reference. The information gathered will inform the committee's views as the inquiry progresses and be reflected in the inquiry report. The committee may also use the responses to support its findings and conclusions.

Appendix 1: List of questions asked

Questions:

1. Please enter your contact details.

Name:

Email address:

Postcode:

2. What is your position on the bill?

Multiple choice

a. Support

b. Neutral/ Undecided

c. Oppose

3. In relation to the previous question, please explain your position on the bill.

500 words – free text box

4. Do you have any other comments on the bill?

250 words – free text box