

**INQUIRY INTO LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF THE  
DAIRY INDUSTRY IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Hon Mark Banasiak MLC  
Committee Chair  
Portfolio Committee no. 4 - Industry NSW Legislative Council  
6 Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

## **Inquiry into the long-term sustainability of the dairy industry in New South Wales**

Dear Mr Banasiak and Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the inquiry into the long-term sustainability of the dairy industry in New South Wales. I am a former dairy and beef farmer of 18 years and have worked and managed farms all around New Zealand. The past three years however I have been using my years of experience and insight to speak out against the very industry I was once a proud part of. To date I have worked with global organisations such as SAFE, Free From Harm, Refarm'd, Surge and Switch4Good, to name a few. During my time in the industry I was responsible for all the day to day running of dairy operations from 190 – 400+ cows and can frankly and confidently say I have 'seen and done it all'. I am fortunate to have a voice and am committed to using it to inform and educate the public on the realities of the dairy industry.

As a New Zealand resident I am well versed on our formerly largest and most profitable industry (1), its pitfalls and shortcomings. Having seen our own government continue to throwing good money after bad in an attempt to prop up the industry and those who are working in it, I would hate to see Australia follow us down the same track in supporting an industry which one day will cease to exist. Public opinion and demand is changing, people are becoming more informed and the younger generation are no longer looking to dairy farming as the wholesome, secure and profitable career it once used to be. I am hopeful that my years as an industry insider will prove helpful and informative in your inquiry.

### **Mental health and stress in dairy farmers**

As you are already aware, the stress levels and issues around poor mental health/suicide risk in dairy farmers are already grave cause for concern. This is an issue which has increased over the years and will only continue to do so. When I first began farming, I was a fresh-faced 19-year-old. Dairy farming was 'the' desirable industry to get into, offering excellent pay, 'clean, green lifestyle' and longterm security. All the young people I knew were working on farms, dreaming of one day owning their own. So it came as quite a shock when my boss would return from milking every day and start throwing furniture around the house, venting his anger and stress. When I left that farm two years later and went to another, the hours were so long and the work was so intense that there wasn't time to make proper meals AND get cleaned up from milking. One of my most vivid memories of my farming years was eating fish finger sandwiches in the bath, it was all we could manage being so exhausted and pushed for time. My 20's and 30's passed in a blur, I have no real memory of life during that time except working on the farm. I don't remember raising my children when they were small. This is pretty typical for most dairy farmers. I remember a couple of years back going to the beach with a family who were still farming. The father and his daughter were surfing together in the ocean. After about an hour, he returned grinning like a Cheshire cat and said that was the longest time he had ever spent

one-on-one with his daughter. She was about to turn 13. It wasn't until we finally left the dairy industry that my husband and I realised what we had lost – almost two decades of our lives, which could never be got back.

I have never met a farmer in the dairy industry who didn't suffer from depression, anger issues requiring anger management therapy or marriage breakdowns. Bear in mind, too, that this was still in the 'golden era' of dairy farming. Today there is even more stress. Farming has become more and more intensive, operations are much larger and with that comes yet more pressure. With ever-increasing information in the media informing the public about both lack of animal welfare and dangers to health from consuming dairy (2), farmers are now coming under fire for being the 'bad guys' and more and more consumers are turning away from dairy products. With 65 - 75% of the world's population said to be lactose intolerant (3), the likelihood of cow's milk products ever regaining their status as 'healthy' or 'essential' is minimal, to say the least.

Many of today's dairy farmers feel trapped. Consumers are demanding they make a change and farm something safer for the body and more environmentally sustainable – but how do you go about doing that when you are already millions of dollars in debt? While I was fortunate enough never to be in that position, I know dairy farmers who were millions of dollars in debt to the bank by the time they were in their 30's, from trying to grow their operation. They are still trapped and struggling to this day. Yet the public's view is that farmers are all 'coining it' and are selfish money-grabbers for not being able to change the way they farm at the drop of a hat. Finding reliable staff is also an issue. Milking cows is no longer the desirable industry it used to be. Today's young people are not willing to get up at 4am or work a 14 hour day, including weekends, with little time off! With Covid now having such a devastating effect on much of the world, workers are even harder to find as it is no longer possible to employ workers from overseas who are willing to do the job. The cracks in the system are growing with every season that passes; in fact many would say it is already broken. The world's population needs farmers to feed us now more than ever – but we need them to be farming something else. Something sustainable, which will help them to feel empowered and valuable – and get them out of the milking shed. They can't do that on their own, the government needs to help them to transition into the farming of the future.

### **Animal welfare and the life of a dairy cow**

I was interested (not to mention concerned) to note in the media release dated 10 August 2020 that among the 'issues plaguing the industry', no mention is made of the animals. The reason I have been speaking out continually against the dairy industry these past three years and am indeed making this submission now is because once again, these innocent victims (for that is exactly what they are) seem to have been ignored and overlooked. Not only are they victims in an industry which exploits and abuses their bodies and reproductive systems from the day they are born to the day their lives are involuntary ended, they receive even more unthinkable abuse from the stressed and mentally unwell farmers your inquiry is concerned about. During my years in the industry I witnessed:

- Cows being beaten on a daily basis in the milking shed, sometimes repeatedly to the point they fell to their knees. I never saw a single cow who was aggressive in any way or deserved such treatment.
- Cows having their tails broken while being milked, if they did something like dared to kick the milking cups off. This happened ALL the time.

- One farmer I worked for would get so angry with the cows at milking time, if one annoyed him, he would get the high pressure fireman's hose, put it into the cow's vagina and turn it on. He also used to beat his cattle dog with a pigtail fencing standard and eventually shot it. 25 years later, that farmer is still milking cows.
- Recently an NZ 'Sharemilker of the Year' recipient was stripped of his title for his social media posts in which he was telling other farmers they could get a cow to let her milk down by putting a pipe into her vagina and blowly sharply up it (4). There was a national outcry, yet this is common practice in the industry, a well known 'hack', as is squirting iodine into the cow's vagina to 'trick' her into thinking she has given birth and encourage her to let her milk down.
- Another farm owner I worked for insisted that we remove any additional teats from young female calves. They are often born with extra ones and this causes no problem but he wanted just four teats, purely for aesthetical reasons. We were required to carry out this task with no anaesthetic, using a pair of sharp kitchen style scissors and a spray bottle of iodine.

Can you think of any other industry where such assault on another living being is carried out with such disregard, nonchalance and regularity? Who is going to help *them*? While the above and more are cases of deliberate abuse, the *entire existence* of a dairy cow is one of abuse. These docile creatures are unforgiveably exploited day in, day out. Even when I was part of the industry myself, I often thought to myself that a dairy cow had the most wretched, miserable life of any animal I had ever encountered. The cycle is both heartless and endless. A calf is born and taken from its mother shortly after birth (again, do you know of any other industry which does anything so inhumane?) causing immeasurable grief and distress to both mother and calf. If the calf is a bull, or the wrong breed, or too small, it is then put on a truck (this alone often causes severe injury as these poor, innocent newborns are often thrown onto the truck or abused by workers who would rather be anywhere else) and then taken to the slaughter house. I've known calves barely over 24 hours old who haven't lived to see another day if they are big enough to pass as a four-day-old. But whether that calf is four days old or one, they have been bred and born, simply to die so humans can have milk in their coffee. Millions and millions, every single year.

If the calf gets to live, she is largely left alone until she is old enough to breed. From then on, she is constantly at the mercy of humans. She and all the other females have a hormone device inserted into their vagina, so they all come on heat at the same time. They are artificially impregnated against their will. They give birth and have their baby taken from them as soon as they have had a chance to wash and nurse it, often they don't even get to do that. And so the cycle goes on. If that calf is a bull it is killed and if it is a heifer it gets to live but will never see its mother until two years later when she joins the herd and becomes a breeding, milking machine herself. I've known cows who were still part of the herd at 16 years old, meaning they had 14 babies taken away from them. Year after year, day after day having their milk stolen from them. Milk which was made for *their* babies, not humans.

The dairy industry is without a doubt one of the most cruel in existence. Fortunately the public are becoming more and more aware of it. Every day more stories surface in the media exposing animal cruelty in the industry and the truth of what happens to cows and calves. People do not want it on their conscience when there are cruelty-free, sustainable and profitable alternatives in the form of plant milks to enjoy in their coffee. These products and many more alternatives have already proven humans have no need for dairy products. Dairy is, quite literally a dying industry.

## Government subsidies moving forward

As mentioned, farmers ARE still very much needed and dairy farmers need all the support they can get when it comes to making the transition into other forms of agriculture. If the Australian government wants a lesson in what *not* to do, look no further than New Zealand. The NZ government spends billions of dollars every year on subsidies intended to prop up the dairy industry. It pays around \$40 million annually to farmers in the Lake Rotorua area, for them not to pollute one single lake with cattle effluent and leach nitrate even further into our already polluted waterways (5). The same goes for Lake Taupo, another popular tourist lake. A further \$90 million goes into subsidising farmers in the Canterbury region. In total, around \$12 BILLION a year goes on subsidising the NZ dairy industry. Yet this is the ludicrous part – the entire industry doesn't even make that much in a year. As more and more consumers, in particular the generations of the future ditch dairy products from their diet and shopping lists, this number will only continue to drop. Were the NZ government to focus that \$12 billion into helping dairy farmers learn about and transition into a more sustainable form of agriculture instead, the mental health and suicide rate would very likely drop and it would no doubt become a lot more appealing to school leavers and future generations. As it is, all NZ currently has to show for that \$12 billion a year is the world's highest rate of colorectal cancer from our polluted waterways (6). If nothing else is taken away from my submission, I urge Australia not to make the same mistake we have.

I would like to end my submission by including some links to articles I have written in conjunction with some of the organisations I mentioned at the start. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

**Switch4Good** - <https://switch4good.org/honest-truth-interview-former-dairy-farm-worker/>

**Free From Harm** - <https://freefromharm.org/animal-farmer-turned-vegan/jackie-scurr/>

**Plant Based News** - <https://www.plantbasednews.org/opinion/dairy-farmer-to-vegan-my-boss-would-always-hit-cows>

Yours sincerely,

### References:

1 - <https://www.stats.govt.nz/experimental/which-industries-contributed-to-new-zealands-gdp>

2 - <https://switch4good.org/dairy-does-a-body-bad>

3 - <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/condition/lactose-intolerance#statistics>

4 - <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/opinion/122093003/top-farmers-tweets-drag-dairy-industry-through-the-dirt>

5 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHpscFcPP1g>

6 - <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/bowel-cancer>