



LIVESTOCK WELFARE COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Established 1978

PRESS RELEASE – 29 May 2020

BY INVITATION

SHIPPING SHEEP FOR SLAUGHTER

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Shipping livestock by sea over long distances for the purpose of slaughter is not a recent phenomenon – the practice has a long and sad history extending back over 30 years, accompanied by a distressing list of problems, risks and disasters that have accompanied it. Only recently, 14 000 sheep were drowned when their transport vessel capsized. The issue of long-distance shipping of livestock has therefore been a long-standing concern to the Livestock Welfare Coordinating Committee.

The LWCC is an independent organisation founded in 1978 which is unique in that it is funded exclusively by various sectors of the livestock industry. It comprises 9 Livestock Associations, 5 Supportive organisations, 4 Government entities, 4 Professional bodies, 2 University Departments and 2 Welfare organisations. These 26 representative bodies address a wide range of livestock welfare issues by inclusive consultation, reasoned debate based on science (not opinion), and they strive to reach an acceptable consensus that reflects a balanced position statement on any particular matter of concern.

Based on this way of approaching issues concerning livestock welfare, LWCC does not support the practice of transporting livestock by sea for the purpose of slaughter after arrival at their destination.

Arguments in favour of this practice are usually based on three tenets, the first being that the religious beliefs of the recipient country demand slaughter where the animals are to be consumed. This is patently untrue for any major religion – the only requirement on this issue is that slaughter is done by authorised persons following the correct procedures. This slaughter can therefore be done locally here in South Africa. The second defence of the practice is that slaughter at the point of consumption follows 'custom', or that consumers

prefer 'hot meat'. Yet mere custom and preference should surely not be allowed to take precedence over humanity and compassion, and these customs and preferences are subject to change over time. After all, refrigerated meat has been sent around the world for nearly 150 years. The third argument is profit – it is more profitable to transport live animals rather than meat. Should profit always take precedence over principle?

There are many more reasons why the practice should not be condoned, let alone recommended or defended. The inherent risks of shipping sheep for slaughter include the following:

- Loading tens of thousands of animals within a few days presents severe logistical challenges, hurried handling and inevitable breakdowns.
- There is no control over what happens to the animals at sea once the ship leaves the harbour, without the supervision of independent inspectors.
- There is no jurisdiction over what is done to the livestock on arrival at the destination. Regulations can be flimsy or non-existent, and amateur slaughter may be the fate of these animals. The local industries must consider what effect this has on consumer perceptions.
- Inspecting 50 000 to 70 000 sheep regularly every day on board for health and welfare is almost impossible without sufficient dedicated, expert and independent inspectors who have the authority to protect health and welfare on the ship.
- Weather conditions are very unpredictable and storms or typhoons can play havoc on the journeys and cause injuries.
- Hot days and nights, especially when extending over several days and accompanied by high humidity (as often experienced over the Equator and in the Arabian Gulf) are a potent factor in causing severe heat stress.
- Ventilation on the ship is often poor or insufficient to enable the animals to lose heat. A breakdown in the ventilation system can have very serious consequences.
- The combination of shared body heat in close confinement with radiant heat from metal structures and sub-equatorial sunlight further contribute to heat stress.
- Poor design on ships leads to unacceptable risks of physical injury.
- A variety of serious animal diseases can become prevalent in the cramped conditions on the ships during voyages. Contamination will always be a problem.
- Feed and water supply are very vulnerable to any disruptions that may occur.

All these risks can be avoided by slaughtering the livestock at local registered export abattoirs, following the correct and approved procedures governing any religious requirements of the importing country involved. We must also consider that slaughtering livestock locally provides work and income for local people.

Livestock intended for breeding are a separate issue and are governed by other legislation and requirements.

The livestock industry must be aware of and concerned by the reputational damage that will be done by their supporting or condoning this practice. The beef, sheep and goat industries of South Africa currently have a largely favourable, welfare-friendly image for consumers, and this perception will be at risk if they are associated with avoidable and unnecessary suffering and cruelty.

It must be emphasised that the LWCC is not opposed to livestock farming or to the meat trade – on the contrary, we know that farmers who look after their livestock well will also have more productive herds and flocks, and better farm profitability. As a guiding principle we urge farmers to eliminate avoidable risks to animal welfare and to minimise the impact of unavoidable risks. We are aware and very appreciative of the majority of farmers who care for their livestock and treat them the best they can. We are also aware of a small but very vociferous minority who put profit before anything else. We must recognise their right to their opinion, even if it misguided, but we should not allow a minority to determine the direction and policies that are in the long-term interests of the livestock industry.