

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Bairnsdale—Tuesday, 20 August 2019

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WITNESS

Ms Judy Leadoux, Leadoux Turkeys.

The CHAIR: Judy, welcome.

Ms LEADOUX: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action from what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. So, before you start, please state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask you questions.

Ms LEADOUX: My name is Judy Leadoux. I live at Mount Lookout Road, Wy Yung. Do you want me to continue with what I have here?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms LEADOUX: Good morning. I would like to introduce myself. I am Judy Leadoux and I grow free-range turkeys, 6 kilometres north of Bairnsdale. I would like to emphasise that I am a person who abhors war and violence, and I believe that we all have a right to pursue our dreams and that no-one has the right to try and influence another's choice in life and particularly when that influence takes the form of trespass, harassment and intimidation. Leadoux Turkeys started as a hobby when my late husband, John Leadoux, decided he wanted to do something a little different with our 21 acres. So we purchased 100 turkeys. Over the years we found that the turkey hobby was growing into quite an enterprise and it was requiring a lot more time and effort to justify the costs of setting up the processing plant. I then left a very good job in one of the local pharmacies to come home and make the turkey farm work. If anybody had told me 40 years ago that I would end up a turkey farmer I would have laughed at them, but here I am.

Our turkeys are brought onto the farm as day-olds and immediately placed in a heated shed under gas brooders. We usually buy in batches of 600 to 700 poults at a time. The poults stay under the heat until approximately five to six weeks of age, assimilating with the mother hen. Our turkeys are grown free-range, with access to their paddocks 24 hours of the day. In saying that, we still have shedding available for them as they do not cope well with extreme heat or cold blustery days or wet weather. They come and go as they wish once they are six weeks of age and do not need to be under a heater. Our birds' welfare is paramount in our lives. We have been known to be out in the paddock late at night making sure the turkeys are all in the sheds and out of the cold and wet, when we have experienced an unexpected change in the weather. It is a most frustrating task because once it gets dark the birds do not seem to be able to find their way back to their shed and therefore would suffer extreme exposure and cold if left out. Never mind that we are wet and cold, but a hot shower soon has us okay again. They love to jump up on perches, and come night-time you will see rows of sleeping turkeys scattered around the yards, quite happy and contented. They are a very inquisitive and social bird. If someone happens to pull up near their yard, you will see them all run to the fence to say hello.

Our turkeys do not suffer any stress when it comes time for slaughter. They are quietly walked from their yards to the holding pen and have absolutely no idea of what is happening. We can be, and are, audited by PrimeSafe, and they can turn up—and have turned up—at our farm without notice at any time to check what we are doing in relation to the welfare of our turkeys. They always end their visit with positive comments.

I would like to say that if these birds were not grown at our farm they would probably not exist at all. Their life is a happy and contented one. They love to get out in the sunshine, have dust baths, chase each other around and especially if one finds something that the others think is really interesting, they all want it.

Turkeys are very susceptible to stress. I heard a comment before about a shed of chickens that people came into, and they all crowded up in one end. This same thing will happen with turkeys. If they get stressed and they get frightened, they will crowd up into a corner—it is called a pile-up—and they will suffocate the ones underneath. That in my mind is cruelty to animals. So stress can be anything from being too hot or too cold to

being overcrowded or being picked on by other turkeys. We have little sick bays in all of our sheds. So that if a bird for some reason—he could be a big, strong bird—has decided he is stronger than one over there and he wants to fight him, then another one will come in, and that first bird will get really tired and he will sit down, and then the others will come on and attack him. If we do not rescue that bird and put him aside, they will kill him for no reason other than the fact that he has got exhausted; all right? So somebody is constantly keeping an eye out for these birds, and we have a little sick bay so that they can still see their mates. They recover, and back out they go.

Our birds are never allowed to be stressed. I will not tolerate any of my birds being mishandled, whether in the yard or when they come in to be processed. I believe it is an imposition on a person's right to farm when there are people in our community who wish to push their ideas onto another and interfere in what is a legitimate and lawful business. I have spent half my life in the turkey business. I have built up a successful and much-sought-after commodity. I am not interested in producing something that I am not proud of. I am proud of Leadoux Turkeys, and I am proud of the animal welfare practised at our farm.

Mr GEPP: Thanks for joining us today and thank you for your submission. You talked a lot about the stress of the birds and making sure that their welfare is paramount and that that is something that is at the core of your business. What sort of standards do you rely upon and advice within the industry and the broader animal welfare industry?

Ms LEADOUX: We are governed by PrimeSafe both in the yards and in the—

Mr GEPP: Do you want to talk us through a little bit about what that looks like, those standards?

Ms LEADOUX: Without having the standards right in front of me, basically it is just that the birds have plenty of room and plenty of water and are not stressed from heat or cold. When they are brought in to be slaughtered they are not to be mishandled, and this is all documented in the PrimeSafe manual. When they are actually slaughtered you either have to stun them or completely sever the head in one go, and that cuts the spinal cord so they do not suffer. We sever their heads. From then on they are dead.

Mr GEPP: Do you do that on farm?

Ms LEADOUX: Yes, we have a licensed abattoir on the farm, and this is why I say they do not have any stress when they are actually taken to slaughter, because they are just walked across. As they are walking they are picking up a few stones and whatever, and it is actually really relaxing, yes—for us and for the birds.

Mr GEPP: How many birds do you have on farm?

Ms LEADOUX: We grow about 10 000 a year. We would probably have about 2500 at a time.

Mr GEPP: Right, and at what age are they slaughtered?

Ms LEADOUX: Depends what we need the bird for. The hens we use mainly for whole birds and buffets. Nine weeks and two days will give us a 4-kilo dressed turkey, and they are putting on around about 180 grams a day, which equates to about a kilo a week. We take the hens through to about 15 weeks. The toms we usually start slaughtering at 15 weeks. The hens we do not take any older because, a bit like us, they go to fat and do not get bigger. The toms at 15 weeks—

Mr GEPP: Let me assure you the toms over here go too.

Mr MEDDICK: Speak for yourself, Mr Gepp!

Mr GEPP: Not all of us.

Ms LEADOUX: The toms we will dress out at 15 weeks at around 14 kilos, and we take them through to 18½ weeks. They just get too heavy for the staff to handle them. So it is not only welfare for the birds; it is welfare for the staff as well.

Ms BATH: Could you explain your farm business structure—how many people you employ and what your reach is and your range? So who do you supply too? I know you have been out to the East Gippsland field days, where I have had a lovely turkey burger, and I see that you are very busy there. So what sort of employment opportunities do you provide?

Ms LEADOUX: Yes, we currently have about 10 staff on the farm plus others—mainly my family—who do the farmers markets. We do four farmers markets, one every weekend, in Melbourne, and that gives us cash flow through the year. Growing turkeys is a little bit like growing sheep for wool. They are really expensive to grow. People think you pop a few turkeys out in the paddock and they just grow. Well, it is not quite like that. The expenses are huge. If you only grow turkeys for the Christmas festive season or for specialty fare, you have got all your money piling up, all your expenses, so by doing the farmers markets, that gives us cash flow.

I am also really, really passionate about turkey as an everyday fare. We do 38 different products that we take to the markets. We would have to be the busiest stand at the markets that we go to. We do the East Gippsland field days, and we do Lardner Park. We started those as an advertising venture, and now it is mainly all my family who work at those two places. There are about 10 of us who work on the stand. We actually cook a meal and sell it to people, as I am sure you are aware.

Ms BATH: I have enjoyed that, Ms Leadoux.

Ms LEADOUX: With our turkeys for Christmas, I am sold out already for this year. So there is huge demand. We get repeat customers. We send turkeys to Queensland, Sydney and Tasmania, and we have got about 40 different butchers between Orbost and Melbourne.

Ms BATH: I know you are very focused on the business and on the farm. Have you had the opportunity to look at other practices overseas in terms of their quality assurance or their farming practices? Is that something that you or an organisation that you are associated with have looked at? I guess what I am asking about is, in relation to Australia, your quality and your standards in relation to potentially other overseas—

Ms LEADOUX: I have not myself. I do belong to the Australasian Turkey Federation, and we have been to New Zealand and been through farms over there. We would be about on a par with them. My little enterprise is quite different to a lot of other turkey growing productions in the fact that our birds are completely free-range. There are two others in Victoria. A lot of the bigger boys have the big sheds—and that is fine; that is the way they do it—but they still have to adhere to the same principles that their birds are not crowded et cetera.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thanks, Judy, for telling us about your business and for coming today and giving information to the Inquiry. So just a question in two parts: we heard in earlier evidence today from the previous contributors about the sorts of medication regimes and antibiotic regimes that they were using to ensure that their animals were kept healthy. Is there a similar type of regime for either vaccinations or those sorts of things with turkeys? Is there some sort of medication regime or other type of regime that is used?

Ms LEADOUX: There could be medication regimes on other farms. We do not use any medication on our farm.

Ms TERPSTRA: Or any antibiotics or anything like that?

Ms LEADOUX: No antibiotics, unless we were suffering a major disease or whatever and the vets had ordered that. We cannot use antibiotics unless it is ordered by a vet, and that would be in the welfare of the birds. That would be the only time that we would. But as a general rule, no, we do not. Our farm is completely free of cholera, and I think we might be the only turkey grower that I know of that does not have to vaccinate for cholera. What others do with their turkey businesses is their business, but we do not vaccinate at all.

Ms TERPSTRA: And just the second part of the question: you alluded to the fact that there are actually a lot of birds there, and they have a shed and they can free-range and go in and out of the shed. So what sort of standards do you hold for yourself, for your business, about the cleanliness of those sheds? Can you tell us a bit about how that works?

Ms LEADOUX: When the birds start off they go onto a litter of shavings. As the birds obviously get in there and they eat, it comes out the other end, so it gets quite mucky. So every couple of days that litter is freshened up. The same goes when they are moved from that brooder shed into another shed, and we use straw for their litter, and the same thing—I have a guy who works for me and that is his job; he goes around and if there are any sheds that are getting a bit dirty, he tops them up. Then when that batch is gone the shed is cleaned out. There are cement floors in most of the sheds. Out in the yards you do not put straw et cetera out there, but if it gets a little bit soiled we have a tractor and we go along and clean that up. It is in our own interest, because if your yard is dirty they can get a disease called erysipelas. My kids think that is quite funny because they say, ‘Mum, your turkeys could get syphilis’. That is quite different! So that is a bacterial infection, and it can be caused by them eating soiled—

Ms TERPSTRA: Dirty, yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Judy, for coming in and giving your testimony today.

Ms LEADOUX: My pleasure, Andy.

Mr MEDDICK: People may find this very strange—and often do—but I have a lot of things in common with people like yourself, and one of those things is that we both abhor violence and intimidation and threats. I am a pacifist by nature. You spoke about those things in your opening statement. May I ask a personal question about your business in that respect: have you ever had farm trespass on your farm?

Ms LEADOUX: No, I have not.

Mr MEDDICK: Have any of your neighbours suffered from the same thing?

Ms LEADOUX: No, they have not.

Mr MEDDICK: Would it then surprise you to know that the Minister for Agriculture’s own statement about this Inquiry was:

I know that there is a perception that these activities are prevalent and common, but I did want to give some context to that. Over the past 12 months there have been no reports of violence or damage to property from animal activists.

Would you then perhaps agree that there is an over-heightened sense that there is something going on in an enormous and regular way that perhaps is not occurring?

Ms LEADOUX: I do not know that it is an enormous and a regular way, but that threat is there. There is a website, and we are on that website because we have licensed abattoirs. Back in April we got a directive from PrimeSafe to say that a demonstration was being organised and we were to be aware and make sure that we were vigilant et cetera. And that sort of leaves a bit of a nasty taste in your mouth, to think that somebody can just come and—

Mr MEDDICK: I can understand that. Are you also aware that there are federal government websites that also list your farm?

Ms LEADOUX: Probably, yes.

Mr MEDDICK: So people can access that same information?

Ms LEADOUX: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Without Aussie Farms. I will come back to other questions in a minute.

Mr QUILTY: We have heard the suggestion earlier that we should have new mandatory rules around how much we look after—do you think that some politicians in Melbourne making a new bunch of rules for how many animals is going to improve or worsen animal welfare for you and for the industry?

Ms LEADOUX: It depends what the rules are, I guess. Surely those people making those rules would have to be informed about growing turkeys et cetera, or whatever animals they are, because I am sure it does not

relate just to turkeys. I do not take great objection to having standards set, because my standards are pretty high as well. I would hope that they would be informed. I know that when the PrimeSafe legislations were being formed that I actually went and sat in on some of the discussions, and a lot of the people involved in the industry also did, because obviously people in another walk of life would not have any idea of what is required. I would hope that they would be informed.

Mr GEPP: I know Mr Quilty is relatively new at this, Chair, but that is the reason why we are having inquiries. Not all politicians—for the second time, Mr Quilty—are from Melbourne. You might want to refrain from suggesting to witnesses that we all are. You know, some of us also travel over the mountains to get here, my friend.

Judy, you talked about your business and a couple of your competitors—the bigger boys, I think you described them as—who choose to grow their product in sheds, as opposed to the free-range approach. I do not know if you can answer this, but the two questions that sprang to mind for me out of that comment were: is there a difference in cost structures for the different approaches, so the sheds versus free-range; and what would be in your opinion the difference in the level of stress on the birds for the two different approaches—or is there? Perhaps there isn't; I do not know.

Ms LEADOUX: As far as costs go, I guess it would actually cost more to have a bigger shed. I mean, you get the day like the last couple of days where the weather has been absolutely abysmal, and the birds do not cope with cold wind and rain. They will actually die. They are like sheep; they suffer from hypothermia. And they will again pile up to keep warm, and you will find the ones on the bottom will suffocate. So it is in our interests to make sure we have adequate shedding. So far as the difference in costs, I guess we have a cost in extra land.

Mr GEPP: Why do you choose to do free-range rather than the sheds?

Ms LEADOUX: Because it sits well with us.

Mr GEPP: Right, okay.

Ms LEADOUX: It is interesting that you say about the birds. One of our competitors, who is now not in business, was over at Aldinga in South Australia. He had huge sheds, kilometres of them. He got some birds. He bought his birds from the same people that we buy our birds from and we compared his birds at the same age against ours because the comment was made, 'I don't know why you do free-range. They are out there, they are running off all the weight'. Would you believe our birds were heavier?

Mr GEPP: Is that right?

Ms LEADOUX: Yes, they were heavier. And do you know why? Because they are happy.

The CHAIR: Rod, do you have a question?

Mr BARTON: No, everything has been just about covered by Judy. Thank you for coming in, and congratulations on your business.

Ms LEADOUX: My pleasure, Rod.

Mrs McARTHUR: Judy, I would just like to go back to your opening remarks about the threat of trespass and intimidation. How have you had to respond to that, and how do you feel about it? Have you had to put specific precautions in place, and what would happen if somebody did come onto your premises unannounced and in numbers?

Ms LEADOUX: We have been advised not to overreact because that is the worst thing you can do, apparently. I think the threat is that somebody is going to be around. We do not have CCTV around at the moment. We were looking at setting up a new farm and one of the things on the agenda was CCTV. When we got the advice back in April that there was a possibility, they did not know which farms were going to be targeted. PrimeSafe suggested that we contact our local police so that they knew what was happening, which I

did. So they noted that, and that meant that if we had a call, that would be our first response: to call for help. In no way would any of our people be advised to retaliate in any way or form. But if our birds were being threatened—as I said before, if the birds get frightened, like these birds' predators come from the sky, and if we get an eagle flying around, those birds will run for cover. It is the same thing if there is a predator that is differently dressed or whatever: they will pile up in the corner. That is a threat to my birds. But unless our birds were being threatened, we would not retaliate.

Ms BATH: Judy, the Aussie Farms Facebook post on the 13th of this month has said:

Here's the fundamental question: if farmers are so proud of what they do, why do they want to do it in utter secrecy?

What is your response to that sort of commentary? What do you believe are the facts actually?

Ms LEADOUX: There is no secrecy about my farm. People can see it from the road. There is a water tank up there that the fire brigade access and so there is a little track there, and we get people who come along and stand there at the fence. Of course when that happens the birds all run up, inquisitive; they are very friendly. My farm is not clouded in secrecy. If anybody wants to come to my door and say, 'Could we have a look at your operation?', I have no hesitation in showing people what we do.

Mr MEDDICK: I just have some queries about some things that you are saying about ages of the birds. I am looking to be educated here. You are saying, I think—and correct me please—that beyond 15 weeks they became too heavy. Is that correct?

Ms LEADOUX: No, no. The hens we take to 15 weeks because once they get to 15 weeks they just lay down fat, they do not put down meat. They will dress out at around 7 to 8 kilos. Toms, on the other hand, at 15 weeks will dress out at around 12 to 14 kilos, and they put on meat—about 2 kilos a week. So we take them to about 18½ weeks. They could keep going, but they get too heavy for my staff to handle.

Mr MEDDICK: What about for their own health? Do they get too heavy for their own health? The legs, weight, that sort of thing?

Ms LEADOUX: No. They are a bird that is specifically bred for the meat market, and that is one of the things that they look for—strength in the legs.

Mr MEDDICK: And the ones at nine weeks?

Ms LEADOUX: Nine weeks?

Mr MEDDICK: Yes, I think you said nine weeks.

Ms LEADOUX: Yes, they are whole birds, and they are dressing out at around 4 kilos, the hens.

Mr MEDDICK: What is the normal lifetime of, say, a turkey left to its own devices, living out its entire life on the farm?

Ms LEADOUX: Well, it probably is a couple of years.

Mr MEDDICK: A couple of years. So nine weeks—in effect, that is a baby in comparison to their entire lifetime?

Ms LEADOUX: I do not know if it is a baby, but they are purpose bred for meat, and as I have said before, if they were not grown on our farm, they would not even have a life, and they have a very happy life.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay. So if I can come back, they are specifically bred. So here is a species of bird, much like within the factory farming of chickens, that is specifically bred to produce the largest amount possible in the shortest amount of time for a particular market.

Ms LEADOUX: I do not see a problem with that. That is not mistreating them. They are bred for their meat.

Ms TERPSTRA: Again, I think you heard us earlier say that it is good for us to be informed as a Committee as well, so this is your opportunity to also let us know. What would you like to see government do to respond to the issue of animal activism? What are your thoughts about what could be improved or done?

Ms LEADOUX: I think there should be heavier penalties if people break the law and trespass onto somebody's property without their permission. That is the biggest thing that I find is an issue.

Ms TERPSTRA: Do you think it is about increasing penalties, or is it enforcing what is already there? There is a difference.

Ms LEADOUX: Probably both.

Ms TERPSTRA: A bit of both.

Mr MEDDICK: Just to that point, are you aware of what the penalties currently are?

Ms LEADOUX: I heard it was \$1.

Mr MEDDICK: No. In fact, the present laws are not sufficient to deter activists. This is a complaint. In fact, Victorian law says that trespass and wilful damage to property worth less than \$5000 attracts a six-month prison term, and for more than \$5000, 10 years. So you do not believe that those are sufficient penalties?

Ms LEADOUX: That is not what has come out in the media—when they trespassed at Gippy Goats.

Mr MEDDICK: So your problem is really not with the law, but perhaps with the judiciary not enforcing the law, which is a different thing.

Ms LEADOUX: Probably, yes. If the law is there, it needs to be enforced.

Mr GEPP: Just one final one from me. This is a very emotive area of course because of recent events. As somebody who is going to go back into Parliament and produce a report—and then Parliament will talk about how we respond—the one thing that seems to be very clear in my mind is that there is not broad understanding around the community about what is going on, both the practices and the views of—

Ms LEADOUX: There is or there is not?

Mr GEPP: There is not. So I am interested if you think that is a correct statement, but then if it is, do you have any pearls of wisdom for us about what we could do to ensure there is better education within the industry but also in the community about livestock farming and animal welfare in particular?

Ms LEADOUX: That is a really hard question to answer.

Mr GEPP: Yes, it is a big one.

The CHAIR: Do you believe there is enough education?

Ms LEADOUX: Probably not. As I have said before, people think with a free-range turkey farm that the birds just get plonked out into the paddock and they look after themselves and eat the grubs and whatever in the grass.

The CHAIR: I think that answers the question.

Ms BATH: In effect, before I believe that Mr Meddick was walking you, Judy, down the path for you to say that the laws need to be enforced, to which you said yes. As it stands, there are no minimum penalties for the example of the Gippy Goat and the lady who was charged \$1. There are no minimum penalties. So the law was enforced in effect, because she was charged \$1. So I guess my question, leading you down the garden path, would be: do you think that is an appropriate minimum penalty?

Ms LEADOUX: Definitely not, no, because it is an intrusion. There was talk before about a person's home—my farm is my home. My home is my farm. So if somebody comes into my property, they are invading my home. Yes, \$1 is nowhere near. It is a joke, it really is.

Ms TERPSTRA: You may or may not be aware but, for example, in the UK they have introduced legislation to have CCTV cameras in abattoirs. What is your view on that? Do you have any particular opinion about whether you would welcome CCTV cameras in an abattoir?

Ms LEADOUX: I do not have a problem with it, do not have a problem. Anywhere on my farm, I do not have a problem. As I said before, we were looking to relocate our farm and that was one of the things that was going to be happening, yes.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for your time and your contribution. You will receive in a few weeks time a copy of the transcript for proofreading. Thank you very much.

Ms LEADOUX: Thank you. My pleasure.

Witness withdrew.