

The Australian

Push to widen live export ban

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ANIMAL welfare advocates including Labor MPs have shifted their attention to the treatment of live cattle exported to Malaysia, Libya and Brunei after Julia Gillard heeded their calls to ban live exports to Indonesia.

The push to broaden the scrutiny of animal welfare came as cattle industry documents emerged to show similar butchery practices to those used in Indonesia have been followed in at least three other nations.

But as the member-owned industry body Meat and Livestock Australia downplayed the concerns, it faced a heavy attack from the Australian Beef Association, which demanded a judicial inquiry into its operation and called on it to compensate cattle producers.

The Prime Minister announced a ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia earlier this week after the ABC television program Four Corners showed footage of brutal treatment of Australian-bred cattle in the Asian nation's slaughterhouses.

The move has stopped a \$330 million-a-year industry in its tracks and sparked calls for taxpayer-funded compensation of cattle exporters.

Much of the criticism focused on the use of so-called Mark 1 boxes -- metal devices designed to restrain cattle so they can be butchered.

Yesterday, The Australian obtained MLA documents revealing the restraint boxes -- the subject of an animal welfare probe being conducted by the nation's Chief Veterinary Officer -- have also been installed in Malaysia, Brunei and Libya.

The MLA last night said Australia was not at present trading cattle with Libya, and the one government-funded Mark 1 restraint box was being used in an abattoir that has now closed.

A spokesman for Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig said last night any further installation of Mark 1 boxes had been banned and any boxes in Brunei were supplied by industry exclusively.

Labor backbenchers Kelvin Thomson and Melissa Parke yesterday said the live processing of Australian cattle in Libya, Brunei and Malaysia needed to be investigated as a part of the independent review set up last week by Senator Ludwig. Labor colleague Janelle Saffin went further, declaring the boxes "torture devices" that should be outlawed globally.

According to the last MLA update, Libya and Malaysia both take 2 per cent each of Australia's live cattle trade, generating \$19m and \$17m a year respectively.

Animal Australia's Lyn White said "clear evidence" had been collected demonstrating the "trauma and suffering caused by these Mark 1 restraint boxes".

"The fact that they have also been supplied and installed in other countries is appalling. Cattle should never be slaughtered using these boxes," she said.

The MLA faced other problems as the government continued to refuse to say whether it would compensate farmers for losses caused by the ban. The ABA called on the MLA to compensate farmers out of its \$40m reserve fund.

ABA director John Carter said the MLA had been a spectacular failure and its handling of the livestock crisis had brought the problems out into the public.

"We need a judicial inquiry because they have wasted incredible sums of money," Mr Carter said.

"They are meant to handle research and development for the meat industry but they have been unsuccessful at both.

"I have had calls just this morning from farmers that are going to be bankrupt because this will mean they get no income for a year," he said.

"So we hope we are able to get this compensation money." Mr Carter said his organisation had approached ministers about their concerns over the producer-owned company but their warnings had fallen on deaf ears.

A 2002 Senate committee report recommending changes to the MLA's board to make it more democratic had not been implemented.

Mr Carter said the ABA was discussing with other cattle producers calling an extraordinary general meeting of the MLA to propose it be wound up. The ABA made a similar motion late last year but failed to win support.

MLA chairman Don Heatley yesterday told ABC radio he would not dip into the \$40m fund for compensation because the decision to impose the ban had been made by Senator Ludwig.

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