

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Opening Remarks

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry on the Definition of Meat and Other Animal Products....and thank you Chair Senator Susan McDonald and committee for today's opportunity to expand on AgForce's submission and answer any questions of the committee.

My name is Michael Guerin, I am the CEO of AgForce, and I am here today with AgForce director, Cattle Board President, and beef producer Will Wilson.

Agriculture and food production in Australia is an industry and activity all Australians can be immensely proud of. We lead the world in many aspects of product quality and environmentally and socially sustainable practices. We create jobs, underpin regional communities, improve, and manage landscapes, provide an abundant supply of locally grown, healthy and fresh produce for all Australians and create income for our country through exports. Agriculture is and will continue to be a key component of the fabric of society in Australia.

AgForce represents a number of plant and meat commodities with circa 6100 members and growing. All our commodities have been involved in putting our submission together and all stand firmly united – we want consumers to be able to know what they are buying. To know that if they want to purchase a plant-based patty they can with confidence because the labelling is clear. To know that if they want to purchase a meat-based patty they can with confidence because the labelling is clear. We simply seek truth in labelling – a reasonable request for any industry, let alone one that so fundamentally contributes to Australia.

In our opening remarks we would like to emphasise five points from our submission.

1. Consumers are confused
2. Consumers want 'Truth in Labelling'
3. A voluntary approach will not suffice
4. A failure to regulate 'truth in labelling' has potentially serious social, environmental, and economic impacts across regional, rural, and remote Australia
5. Sustainability **is** being built into our plant and meat-based production industries in Australia

1 Consumers are confused

Recent research, referenced in our submission, clearly shows consumer confusion. Circa 61% mistook at least one so called plant-based meat product as containing meat. AgForce and industry are deeply frustrated that the ACCC chose to advise otherwise - that there is no confusion. The facts and evidence tell a different story. Circa 66% expect products to contain meat when the packaging and advertising intimate such using things like pictures of animals, describing the product using the term meat, etc.

Concerningly, much of the source of inappropriate labelling is products manufactured overseas. These products are often highly processed with a multitude of additives and artificial flavourings, such that it cannot even be recognised as plant-based anymore.

2 Consumers want 'truth in labelling'

That same research, referenced in our submission, shows consumers want truth in labelling. They want to know whether their product is meat based or plant based, want to be able to make their dietary choices with full knowledge of the ingredients of the product they are buying. Consumers have dietary preferences, sometimes driven by medical needs and often by lifestyle choices. The apparent arrogance of those who wish to take that choice from consumers is to us breathtaking and dangerous. Sadly however, they have shown by their actions a dangerous and reckless disregard to consumers and their dietary choices.

3 A voluntary approach will not suffice – we need regulation

Proponents of a number of plant-based products have shown irrefutably, that they will continue to drive misleading promotional efforts in selling their plant-based products as meat based if not appropriately regulated. Research clearly and demonstrably shows a continuing creep of misleading branding and product statements on plant-based food products. Indeed, and as an example, just in the last couple of weeks whilst the plant-based proponents have been hailing a voluntary code as sufficient, foreign owned vegan food manufacturer, 'Impossible Foods' announced a name change to 'Impossible Beef Made from Plants'. Their actions speak to their intent. Their intent is clear. If a strong stance including a regulated approach is not taken and taken urgently so much is at risk. They are disingenuous in that their actions belie their protestations. We have an industry at risk in Australia and must act. We **don't** need more research; we need a regulated approach to protect an industry critical to Australia's future and with so much to offer.

The brand and reputation of natural Australian beef, lamb and goat built over generations is now being denigrated by companies that are deliberately trying to use piggyback marketing. The risk to Australia cannot be overstated.

4 A failure to regulate 'truth in labelling' has potentially serious social, environmental and economic impacts

Australia enjoys a privilege the envy of much of the world. That is, fresh, healthy, locally grown food available to all Australians 7 days a week, 365 days a year. No matter what dietary choices an Australian makes, their needs are catered for by an industry we can all be immensely proud of. Failing to allow consumers to make those informed choices in their food buying and dietary preferences is not only disingenuous, it is deeply problematic from the perspective of choice, health, industry sustainability and truth. Australia produces food that caters to all dietary preferences (be they voluntary or medically advised).

Taking that choice away from consumers threatens confidence in the industry, confidence in buying options and ultimately in premiums and product development in Australia. Why would we give that up – it makes no sense. The agriculture and food industry in Australia supports directly or indirectly hundreds of thousands of jobs and creates billions in earnings. It can continue to grow in a sustainable way – but it could well be something put at risk if the consumer can no longer buy with confidence about the ingredients in their food choices.

The \$6.825 billion levy investment by the Australian meat and livestock industry over 25 years on meat category branding must be acknowledged. The government maintains and periodically upgrades its regulatory framework to protect industry investment into meat category branding. The regulatory framework should now expressly preclude non-levy-paying industries from misappropriating the branding (which includes meat terminology) reserved for the levy-paying red meat and livestock industries.

5 Sustainability is being built into our plant and meat-based production industries in Australia

The notion that particularly our animal-based industries are unsustainable is incorrect. Indeed, for the last 20 years since COP 3 the external data proves beyond doubt that the broadacre industries of Australia are doing the heavy lifting with our current climate and emissions challenges. For example, ruminant animals are a critical part of the carbon cycle and have been a central part of the Australian landscape for many thousands of years.

In conclusion, thank you for giving us the chance to discuss this issue today. It is in our view a critical and urgent conversation for Australia.

The privileges we enjoy in Australia and that are on display every time we enter the supermarket, that is fresh, healthy, locally grown food available to all Australians 7 days a week, 365 days a year are at risk if we cannot clearly and unequivocally provide the consumer with an understanding of the ingredients of that food choice.

These privileges and strengths we enjoy and perhaps take for granted could be irrevocably damaged if we are unable to tell our story clearly and fully. Lets stand proudly behind our industry by providing 'truth in labelling' and allow the consumer (domestically and internationally) to buy Australian food with confidence that the labelling accurately describes the ingredients.

Thank you.