

Can meat exports be made humane? Here are three key strategies

By [Andrew Butt](#), [Andrew Fisher](#) & [Shakira Hussein](#)

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Horrific footage of animals dying in [extreme heat](#) aboard ships has raised fresh questions over the future of Australia's live export industry.



Shpernik088 via [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Animal_live_export_israel_07.jpg Wikimedia Commons]]

Federal Agriculture Minister David Littleproud has announced a [review of the sheep trade](#) to the Middle East, while the federal Labor party has promised to [ban the trade](#) if it wins the next election. Farmers' groups argue that the industry is [too important](#) to halt.

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[The ALP promises to phase out live sheep export](#)

So what do we need to do to humanely sell Australia's meat to the world? Can the meat be processed on our shores? And with many of Australia's livestock destined for the Middle East or Indonesia, can religious slaughter requirements be met while avoiding unnecessary animal suffering?

We asked three experts: an agricultural specialist, a veterinarian and a religious scholar.

Increase regional Australian meat processing

Andrew Butt, Associate Professor in Sustainability and Urban Planning, RMIT University

Meat exports, particularly beef, have increased considerably in recent decades, overtaking wheat to become Australia's [largest agricultural export by value](#).

However, only about [20% of beef exports by carcass weight](#) are live, mostly to Indonesia. For sheep meat (lamb and mutton), the proportions are similar, with about 20% by carcass weight comprising live exports going almost exclusively to Middle East markets. Lamb exports have increased fivefold over the past two decades, while domestic consumption has remained flat.

The national figures nevertheless conceal considerable regional variation. In some places, most or all of the production happens within the same local areas.

The regions of New England and of Toowoomba and Darling Downs, for example, have relatively high levels of employment in both agriculture and meat processing. Conversely, 10% of outback Queensland's workforce is in beef cattle farming – the highest in Australia – but local processing employment is virtually non-existent.

Read more:

[***The ALP promises to phase out live sheep export***](#)

In many regions, the abattoir and meat-processing industries are seeing changes common to other industries: rationalisation and [automation](#).

We have an opportunity to improve the way we handle meat processing in Australia. Orthodox regional development policy would seek to retain as many stages of production as possible in the local region – in this case growing, feed production, transport, slaughtering and packing of meat products. By increasing meat processing in areas with large farming communities, we can strengthen these chains.

Live sheep and cattle exports are contingent on the cultural preferences *and* supply-chain limitations of key overseas

markets. That is, some countries may not have the reliable refrigeration needed to keep processed meat fresh.

Read more:

[Can live animal export ever be humane?](#)

It may be possible to seamlessly substitute this trade for domestically slaughtered and processed meat, but this should be considered in the context of a highly differentiated industry with pronounced regional differences.

Improve shipping conditions

Andrew Fisher, Professor of Cattle and Sheep Production Medicine, University of Melbourne

The welfare challenges for sheep during the current live export process are centred around five issues:

1. failing to eat during the voyage
2. salmonella infection of the gastrointestinal tract (often linked to failure to eat)
3. heat stress
4. other onboard conditions related to lying space, lying conditions and ease of access to food and water
5. handling and conditions in the receiving country, including treatment at slaughter.

Heat stress was the primary cause of the recently revealed sheep deaths on board the Awassi Express in August 2017.

Sheep exported from Australia during the southern winter are at greater risk of heat stress. This is because the animals are adapted to cooler conditions before being exposed to the climate of the Equator and the Middle East, which is hottest at that time of the year.

Read more:

[Stop the sheep trade in the northern summer, veterinarians say](#)

The risk of heat stress causing suffering and death can be reduced to some extent by reducing the stocking density of the sheep on a voyage. This enhances airflow around the animals and reduces the build-up of humidity and ammonia from the accumulating manure. The actual space available to each sheep would vary with the weight of the sheep and the ventilation design of the ship.

Eliminating almost all risk of heat stress would probably mean having much lower stocking densities all the time, and [avoiding shipments entirely during the Australian winter.](#)

Read more:

[**Australia's history of live exports is more than two centuries old**](#)

The use of very low stocking densities or even air-conditioned ships may be technically feasible (just as it is for human passengers). In practice, however, the economics of this may prompt a shift away from the mass live export of sheep for slaughter.

Engage with religious leaders

Shakira Hussein, McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow, National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies, University of Melbourne

A large portion of Australia's live exports go to Muslim-majority Middle Eastern countries and Indonesia. (As previously noted, one major reason is limited refrigeration facilities outside major cities.)

Another factor is the need for meat to be slaughtered according to religious rules, making the meat either halal or kosher.

Halal and kosher slaughter is supposed to provide the animal with a quick and humane death. But there is some dispute over the exact details, so not all of the "halal-certified" meat processed in Australia is regarded as acceptable by all Muslim communities.

Read more:

[**Explainer: what is halal, and how does certification work?**](#)

Broadly speaking, for both halal and kosher meat, the animal's throat must be cut and the blood drained (as the consumption of blood is prohibited). Animals should be slaughtered individually so they are not subjected to the sight of other animals being killed.

The major issue is that Australian regulations require that animals be stunned before being killed. Some Islamic scholars argue that this is not halal, on the grounds that it may kill the animal before the blood has been fully drained.

However, all halal chicken and the vast majority of halal livestock slaughtered in Australia are pre-stunned. This includes meat for both the export and domestic markets.

Read more:

[**Explainer: the ethics of ritual slaughter**](#)

A small number of Australian slaughterhouses have been granted exemptions from the requirement to pre-stun animals, to provide for halal and in particular kosher slaughter. Kosher slaughter does not accommodate pre-stunning. In these cases, cattle are stunned after the throat is cut, while sheep must be stunned if the animal does not quickly lose consciousness.

Refrigerated meat cannot entirely substitute for live exports because freshly slaughtered meat is regarded as being of higher quality. The festival of *Eid al Adha* also involves the slaughter of livestock as part of the ritual.

If Australia were to end live exports, it would be important to reduce the negative impact on societies such as Indonesia by supporting the development of the local livestock industry and of refrigeration facilities in regional areas.

Local Muslim community organisations and leaders can also play a crucial role by emphasising that the compassionate treatment of animals is a core element of Islam and that unnecessary cruelty is not halal.

Correction: *This article was updated at 4:47pm on May 9. A previous version of the article omitted the qualifier “by carcass weight” when stating the percentage of live meat exported from Australia. This error was introduced during the editing process.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Butt, Associate Professor in Sustainability and Urban Planning, *RMIT University*; Andrew Fisher, Professor of Cattle & Sheep Production Medicine, *University of Melbourne*, and Shakira Hussein, McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow; Writer and researcher, National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies, *University of Melbourne*

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