

Ritual slaughter ruling condemned

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THE World Society for the Protection of Animals has condemned the Federal Government for allowing the ritual slaughter of conscious animals for halal and kosher meat to continue in Australian abattoirs.

The organisation, the world's largest federation of animal welfare societies, said the Government's position could "open the floodgates" for demand for the "inhumane" slaughter method in the Middle East.

"By allowing ritual slaughter without stunning, federal and state ministers are damaging Australia's international reputation as a progressive country," the society's farm animals program manager, Amy Firth, said. "With the Middle East being Australia's biggest export market, the resulting impact this could have on the welfare of Australian animals should not be underestimated."

The Barristers Animal Welfare Panel, consisting of 90 barristers including 20 silks, also spoke out on the issue yesterday, saying it would urge all federal MPs to put a stop to ritual slaughter without stunning.

Panel chairman Graeme McEwen said the issue showed agriculture ministers had a conflict of interest and put industry interests before animal welfare.

The criticisms follow a meeting last week of federal and state agriculture ministers that decided to let the practice continue while more consultation took place, more than two years after a review of ritual slaughter was ordered by the previous government. The ministers agreed to release two scientific reports this week on ritual slaughter.

The first says sheep slaughtered without first being electrically stunned unconscious can suffer "panic and terror" but stopped short of opposing the practice. The second report says slaughter without stunning poses a risk to animal welfare and that animals remain aware between two and 20 seconds after their throats are slit.

Four Victorian abattoirs - Midfield Meats at Warrnambool, Hardwick's Meat Works at Kyneton, GA Gathercole of Carrum and MC Herd at Geelong - were exempted two years ago from a rule requiring animals to be stunned before slaughter, to meet some halal and kosher export contracts.

Federal Agriculture Minister Tony Burke said this week that no decision had been made to remove the exemptions.

Other meat processors fear the exemptions will tarnish the industry, and the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union says its workers do not want to kill conscious animals. Australia exported 1.5 million tonnes of red meat last year, of which 5316 tonnes was from livestock killed without stunning.