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Live Animal Export: False hopes on a dying fleet

Splash

Splash • November 12, 2024 6 10,488 7 minutes read



What happens to a live export trade when the ships don't return? Dr Lynn Simpson, a well-known former live export veterinarian, makes her Splash return today.

In the age of refrigerated sea and air cargo, how long will modern-day practices condone mass numbers of live animals becoming unwitting seafarers? How many animals need to be exposed to especially risky voyages on increasingly decrepit old clunkers?

Not as long as some are falsely promising.

Disaster after disaster, exposé after exposé, Australia has finally legislated a ban for the live exportation of sheep by sea as of May 2028. This legislative evolution closely followed the UK ban on exporting slaughter animals that was announced (and implemented immediately) in May this year.

Some farmers are understandably struggling with the news – the following information may help them to understand the logistic

challenges.

I believe Australia has around 17 ships left that appear willing and able to currently carry livestock without serious constraints. These 17 ships have a combined gross tonnage of 209,092t (70,000 gt of which is currently unavailable on long-term charter to South America). For reference, one of the 17, the infamous *Awassi Express* (now *Anna Marra*, pictured) has an individual gross tonnage of 40,347 gt.

*The average age of the global livestock carrier
fleet is now 39 years old*

Compare this to the 1990s when there were over 80 livestock ships servicing Australia, many of them massive sheep carriers, and a global fleet in the hundreds.

These 17 remaining livestock carriers can all carry sheep, but they won't.

Sheep are an economics of scale business, and these mostly smaller ships that remain already service the busy, short-haul beef cattle trade, and have a long trade future ahead of them. These ships are unlikely to be financially viable/available for the sheep trade.

Since those halcyon days between the '80s and mid-noughties when the Australian sheep trade was up 90%, refrigerated cargo has gained popularity, the live trade has become globally condemned for animal welfare reasons, and as such the fleet has shrunk and not been replaced. Investment and insurance confidence is very low, crippling replacement plans.

Where will this trade be in the four or so years it may take to find shipyard space and finalise a build or conversion? A risky investment indeed to project into 2029.

Meanwhile, livestock carrier numbers continue to decline as they age, stop trading, are abandoned, experience overwhelming structural or mechanical failures, fail to meet regulatory guidelines, are arrested, burn, ground, run into disrepair from the corrosive nature of soaking in sewerage, sink, or get scrapped.

The global livestock export fleet appears to have just 111 registered ships remaining – some of which have been idle for a while and could be off my list any day now. Having personally worked on many I don't mind ticking them off.

The oldest ship still actively trading had her 60th birthday this year. The youngest is a mere seven years old, but tiny – indicative of future trade confidence.

*Around 90% of the live sheep trade from
Australia has disappeared over the past 20
years*

The average age of the global livestock carrier fleet is now 39 years old. Ancient in shipping norms. Making it the oldest saltwater fleet of any sector in the world. Terrifying as a seafarer.

Generally, 25 years old is seen as a respectable age to retire (scrap) and replace a ship based on commercial, maintenance and safety realities.

There can never be too many safety precautions with shipping. The exceptionally long list of shipping catastrophes in the livestock carrier sector is a testament to that.

With safety in mind, new European Union(EU) livestock carrier regulations to be implemented in 2026 foresee the banning of all 29 black-flagged (Paris MoU) ships currently trading there. Many may

struggle to exist by then and the remainder will likely struggle to find work or be scrapped. This could optimistically leave, a global fleet (inclusive of Australia's 17) of only 82 livestock carriers remaining.

Discussions to ban the EU's grey-flagged (Paris MoU) vessels are also on the table, this could displace a further 18 vessels – none of which are likely to be accepted in Australia. All ships removed from the EU trade would provide opportunities for Australia's recently lost/migrated tonnage to provide somewhat more reliable, modern vessels for the Mediterranean trade.

Australia's livestock fleet is certified and regulated by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) using Marine Orders 43 (MO43). AMSA is known worldwide for having very strict standards with livestock carriers and requires each vessel to carry an Australian Certificate for the Carriage of Livestock (ACCL). These standards are highly reliant on structural integrity, robust designs based on animal welfare parameters and the ability to meet current international safety standards. It has been suggested that all livestock carriers globally should meet the MO43 standards as a minimum for trade. I concur fully.

Since 2010, Australia appears to have seen the last visit from over 20 livestock carriers, their collective gross tonnage of around 416,328 gt (double what currently services Australia) has been lost from the Australian trade. These vessels left for various reasons; age, disrepair, failure or reluctance to meet upgraded standards such as single tiers and improved ventilation, being abandoned, sinking, and most recently trade difficulties from increasing security concerns surrounding the Israel-Gaza war.

This leaves Australia currently with a younger fleet of 17 trading vessels, with an average age of 17 years, and a residual tonnage of 209,092 gt, that is around 35% of what Australia has had access to since 2010 for both cattle and sheep exports.

This tonnage attrition is also of intense interest to the New Zealanders; they are hoping to use Australian certified ships if they proceed with their questionable proposal to reverse their ban on live dairy cattle

exports. Their target market in China is currently culling more surplus to needs dairy cattle than they are importing – this reversal appears to be a fool's errand.

Australian sheep farmers are regularly told that food security for the Middle East is dependent on their sheep sailing live. This is incorrect. The current Australian chilled sheep meat exports to the Middle East alone are worth eight times the value of the entire live sheep trade from Australia – A\$632m (\$414m) versus A\$77m as of 2022/2023.

Also, Australia is not the main source of sheep exports for the world, it's not even in the top five.

These numbers sadly paint a grim picture for millions of animals suffering at sea. However, there is a somewhat silver lining. The sheep coming from non-Australian ports are generally enduring a much shorter voyage when compared to being sent across the tropics from Australia. Most journeys are carrying animals that do not require the life-threatening heat challenge and acclimatisation that southern hemisphere sheep suffer from. These other markets have not come from the opposite hemisphere therefore the sheep are somewhat seasonally conditioned.

Most non-Australian exported sheep are also not being denied a legally mandated pre-stunned slaughter as is the norm for Australian sheep. If a sheep is processed in Australia, it is pre-stunned according to the law, and should know nothing of its throat being cut. In the live sheep markets in the Middle East the majority will experience a painful and stressful death while fully conscious, the majority of which will still be sold as cuts under cling wrap in a modern refrigerated supermarket. Regardless of Australia's poorly regulated attempts to avoid this negative welfare outcome – live export and fully conscious slaughter is a massive welfare loss for Australian sheep.

Many other countries' sheep were not born into the relative legal, welfare safety net of pre-stunned slaughter, hence being exported sadly does not change their ultimate slaughter outcome.

The live trade ban will avoid this unnecessarily cruel outcome for Australian sheep. Processing in Australia – even for religiously specified Halal orders – requires all animals are pre-stunned making live sheep exports from Australia literally a fate worse than death.

These factors create a net animal welfare gain for Australian sheep and on a global scale, there is an opportunity for sheep from other countries to benefit from the relatively better carriage conditions on Australia's now redundant, but more modern sheep ships. A further potential global net welfare gain.

The Australian live sheep trade phase-out has hit at a sweet spot in time. There is currently a correlation of increased uptake of chilled sheep meat exports, massive, sustained community disapproval of the trade, and the development of enough processing capacity in Australia to slaughter all sheep previously destined for the ships – making the perceived need for live sheep ships in Australia redundant.

It appears a win-win situation (unless you are the sheep getting slaughtered) – made more palatable by the fact the Australian government is offering a transition period of four years and a financial aid package of A\$139.7m to farmers and processors who need assistance. A lucky break really, the UK gave nothing to its farmers when ending the same dying trade.

Many agricultural bodies are complaining about the amount of government funding being offered and the concept of being blindsided. However, I would suggest they might be the ones who have not done their homework and/or not shared critical information with those it matters to most – the farmers.

The stark reality is that around 90% of the live sheep trade from Australia has disappeared over the past 20 years.

What's more, during that time Australia has lost most of the livestock carrier tonnage that regularly carried sheep. Sheep cannot swim to the Middle East.

The reasons for decreased live trade are many: increased sheep meat exports, lower profit margins and a massive commercial and logistic reality that seems to have slipped under the radars of trade representatives – there are almost no live sheep ships willing and able to trade from Australia anymore. Simple.

Regardless of false and misguided hopes, until the Australian sheep trade becomes illegal in May 2028 these remaining 17 ships will have to be shared between the Australian sheep and beef cattle trade – and possibly New Zealand's apparently doomed dairy attempt.

Sheep farmers and their associated workers need facts, not rhetoric. Here's hoping that the industry bodies paid by farmer levies can stop pushing false hope of a ban reversal, and finally advise and direct the Australian farmers on how best to transition away from the live sheep trade, maximise the use of any available transition funding from the Australian government before others access it, and future proof their farming operations.

It is important to acknowledge that the livelihoods formerly benefiting from the Australian live sheep trade are not being taken away by the government. No amount of lobbying can resuscitate this trade. The trade is very clearly experiencing its natural death.

Nothing lives forever, livestock ships are dying.

[**#Australia**](#)[**#Dr. Lynn Simpson**](#)[**#Livestock**](#)

Comments



David Boffey

November 12, 2024 at 5:45 pm



Judy Olson

November 12, 2024 at 5:55 pm



Andrew Craig-Bennett

November 12, 2024 at 11:32 pm

Same here.



Anne Hardy

November 13, 2024 at 7:41 am

The end of this appallingly cruel trade can't come soon enough.



Frank

November 13, 2024 at 10:51 am

Lets just ignore the reality that the only reason there is a live animal trade is the requirement for religious considerations during slaughter.

Notable also is the countries that are receiving the animals don't have great infrastructure for refrigerated boxes and thus require live animals like they did a thousand years ago.



Jenn

November 14, 2024 at 12:32 pm

Oh Frank „on the contrary,the container ports throughout the Middle East are massive and high techlots of refrigeration mate ,actually it's the state of the art .And

Administración Nacional de Puertos Uruguay maybe re read that bit about Halal slaughter in Australia

