

## **Fiction is Fact: The Influence of Public Perceptions on Poultry Production Systems in Australia**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There has been much spoken – but less documented – about the disconnect between the average Australian and agriculture. According to the National Farmers' Federation, a nation-wide poll<sup>1</sup> commissioned by the organisation in 2017 showed that 83% of Australians would describe their connection with farming as 'distant' or 'non-existent'. The corollary of this is that the average Australian knows little, and understands less, of how we farm and why agricultural industries adopt the practices that they do. In the absence of this understanding, misunderstandings and perceptions can proliferate. Many of these perceptions are negative, with members of the public, often led by single-issue advocacy groups, increasingly challenging how our industries operate and demanding change. The extension to this is that agricultural industries risk losing their social license to operate in the manner they deem most appropriate, if these perceptions are not addressed.

Traditionally, the poultry industries in Australia have used science and logic to make the case to regulators regarding the desirability and 'need' for their producers to farm in the manner of their choice – generally the most practical and efficient production systems available, taking into consideration a range of other, sometimes conflicting, imperatives, such as bird welfare and food safety.

Industry has similarly used science-based evidence, other factual data and logic to attempt to describe and explain to the community its practices and to justify why it does things the way it does. It has assumed and expected community acceptance based on this. This has been the approach adopted in many areas where the general public has demonstrated some level of scepticism or unwillingness to fully accept and embrace industry practices, but in no area more so than in the area of animal welfare.

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A plethora of science and other evidence has therefore been produced to show that there are pros and cons that need to be weighed up in reaching a conclusion about the welfare outcomes for birds kept in different housing systems, or conclusions as to whether it is better to preventatively treat an entire flock by beak trimming than to risk the substantial welfare consequences for a variable proportion of the flock due to cannibalism later on in life, as examples.

It has been widely assumed that, armed with these facts, we will be able to go out and convince the public that our practices are not only sound, but in the best interests of all, and we have believed that the approach to achieving this is to go forth and ‘educate’ the increasingly disconnected consumer about industry practices.

### **Has this approach worked?**

While this approach has met with some success in the past, the more recent history in Australia suggests that this strategy may not be tenable in the longer term, at least in some areas of intense community scrutiny and concern. Primary reasons for this derive from two fundamental flaws in our assumptions, and these flaws are that (a) the industry’s and the community’s understanding of what terms such as ‘good welfare’ mean are aligned, and (b) if people know and understand why we do things the way we do, they will accept the way we do things.

#### *(a) What constitutes good welfare?*

It is not so long ago that our animal industries more generally defined animal welfare simplistically as the absence of cruelty and suffering. Few in our poultry industries today would argue that simply surviving equates to ‘good welfare’. Indeed, this broader acceptance that welfare constitutes more than the absence of premature death and acute suffering has been progressively reflected in animal protection legislation in Australia, with many jurisdictions enacting animal welfare or animal care legislation over and above or in place of the older ‘prevention of cruelty to animals’ legislation over the past two decades. Current animal protection and welfare legislation in place in Australia is listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Current animal welfare legislation in Australia

ACT	<u>Animal Welfare Act 1992</u>
NSW	<u>Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979</u>
NT	<u>Animal Welfare Act</u>
Qld	<u>Animal Care and Protection Act 2001</u>
SA	<u>Animal Welfare Act 1985</u> (previously titled the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1985, up to 2008)
Tas	<u>Animal Welfare Act 1993</u>
Vic	<u>Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986</u> <u>Livestock Management Act, 2010</u>
WA	<u>Animal Welfare Act 2002</u>

It is still often assumed by many in our industries that it is sufficient for the birds we use to not only survive, but to be healthy and grow well to meet the requirements of ‘good welfare’. This assumption incorrectly equates low mortality and good flock performance to good welfare outcomes. Certainly, elevated flock mortality and poor performance is likely to be reflective of poor welfare, and it would be difficult to substantiate a claim of having achieved a good welfare outcome if mortality is elevated and/or performance poor, but low mortality and good performance doesn’t necessarily equate to good welfare, at least not at the individual bird level.

Over the past 30 years, industry has gradually come to accept the internationally well-known and generally well understood and accepted principles of the ‘Five Freedoms’ as defining what constitutes ‘good welfare’. These are:

- Freedom from thirst and hunger
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury, and disease
- Freedom to express most normal behaviour
- Freedom from fear and distress

While the ‘five freedoms’ have proven to be a useful concept to achieve better alignment of community and industry expectations with respect to appropriate animal welfare standards, and they possibly continue to satisfy the majority of the community’s expectations with respect to achieving

adequate (if not good) welfare, there remain problems with their use, as explained by Mellor (2016<sup>2</sup>). The major problem is that their major focus is on removing negative experiences, and this has in more recent times been challenged.

Today, a growing part of the broader community adheres to the belief that it is not sufficient that animals we use not be exposed to negative experiences, but that should have experienced a range of positive experiences and states during their lifetime – that they should have lived a ‘good life’ or a ‘life worth living’. This is not a concept that has been broadly by the industry – not through lack of caring, but because it is not clearly understood what it means in practice.

While the above highlights the lack of alignment between what industry and the community understands to be appropriate specifically in the context of animal welfare, potential issues of lack of alignment on what is appropriate in other areas exist also e.g. antibiotic use, genetic modification.

*(b) ‘Education’ is the answer!*

There is a widely held assumption that if the community is given the facts, then people will understand how and why industry does things the way it does, and they will accept industry practices. This common school of thought goes that by ‘educating’ the consuming (and non-consuming) public in this way, that they will actually feel better about the way things are done having been ‘educated’.

But what if the public doesn’t actually *want* to know or doesn’t care about the facts? What if:

- they don’t want or have the time to be ‘educated’
- they aren’t interested in the facts or the science
- they don’t believe the science or the industry’s interpretation of it
- they prefer to believe someone else’s take on the science, or someone else’s opinion over industry’s (someone they trust more than industry)
- even if they accept the facts, they don’t care, because their own instinctive reactions to what they see and believe tell them something else?

I would contend that the majority of the community doesn’t want to be ‘educated’.

A good illustration of a combination of the above forces at play can be seen in the response to the public consultation on the proposed new Australian Poultry Welfare Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs), which went to public consultation on 28 November 2017 for a 90 public consultation

period. The draft S&Gs were made available on the Animal Health Australia's animal welfare standards website<sup>3</sup>, where they were accompanied by instructions for how submissions could be made, a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) and associated other supporting materials. Interestingly:

- Over 167,000 submissions to the public consultation were received.
- The "Poultry" page on this website received 19,713 visits during the consultation period;
- Only 11,238 of these resulted in visits to the Poultry Public Consultation page<sup>4</sup>, from which the actual draft S&Gs and RIS were accessible (and this was the only place from which they were available or any information on what was proposed was available).
  - unfortunately, the website analytics do not allow statistics to be provided on how many times these two documents may have been accessed.
- Therefore, it's fairly safe to assume\* that less than 7% of people or organisations who made submissions bothered to visit the site to view what was actually being proposed in the draft standards, or the analysis of what the implications were of adopting the various options proposed.

\*NB Both the documents in question were large (2.5MB and 8.8MB) and no major organisations which publicly enlisted support for submissions to be made by their supporters and the public more generally made these documents directly available as PDFs in their online electronic communications.

- Out of the 167,000 submissions received, only 209 submissions were assessed as being substantive or major submissions in that they addressed the RIS and/or the draft S&G (a list of these is available from the consultation report<sup>5</sup>) i.e. less than 0.13% of submissions actually addressed either the actual draft S&Gs or RIS.

A reasonable conclusion that could be drawn from the above points is that the vast majority of submissions from people who felt strongly enough about the issue of poultry welfare to be bothered to make a submission at all, reflected and were driven by opinion, not necessarily fact. We also know that the opinions expressed were largely shaped by others, not by the industry.

Would 'better' or more education, or presentation of the facts in an easier to assimilate or more relatable way have changed the outcome of the consultation? We don't know, but we do know that our message is not always straightforward or simple to communicate and that we will never dominate the mainstream or social media, at least not with factual information anyway.

The reality is that our industries are now operating in an environment in which opinion trumps facts.

### **Perception is the New Reality**

#### *How Has This Trend Impacted Australian Poultry Production Systems?*

To date, the most obvious example of perceptions driving change is the development of the free-range sector, now representing more than 36% of all eggs produced and approximately 20% of all meat chickens produced.

However, we have also seen the emergence of production systems specifically designed to meet the demands for poultry products produced to standards that satisfy a range of consumer expectations around attributes such as animal welfare, more 'ethical', more 'natural' and 'safer' production practices. In the chicken industry, consumer demand for chicken meat produced without the use of any antibiotics (including ionophores) saw Hazeldene's launching its "Bare Bird"<sup>6</sup> label in October 2017. This offering not only ticks off the antibiotic free, but also guarantees that the birds were raised on a vegetarian diet and have outdoors access as well.

The above example illustrates the fact that community perceptions that drive consumer demand can provide opportunities, as producers develop niche products to take advantage of new, emerging markets. However, the problem for industry is when niche becomes mainstream, and this is particularly problematic if this arises from regulatory intervention, rather than being driven by broad consumer popularity.

Evidence of community perceptions and opinions driving government policy making to the extent that regulatory changes are imposed on production systems have to date been largely 'around the edges', such as changes in cage dimensions for laying hens and standards for what constitutes 'free range' in the case of egg production. However, the current Australian poultry welfare standards and guidelines process could well see the imposition of more significant changes imposed under Australian law.

What will the outcome from this process be? That's yet to be seen, however it is notable that, in acknowledgement of the widespread community concern regarding conventional cages for laying hens expressed through the consultation process, Egg Farmers of Australia in its own submission supported a regulated cap being placed on current conventional cage farming in Australia. This was offered as a temporary solution until the industry can expand its engagement

program and show that it has community support for the way it farms. In effect this means that any cage installations made while the cap is in place would need to be enriched with the addition of nest and perches.

While the chicken industry is largely supportive of the changes proposed in the original draft S&Gs that apply to its sector, there is growing concern that its future operating environment – not just in the area of animal welfare, but a range of other fields including management of animal health - will increasingly be defined by the views and perceptions of an increasingly disconnected community, innately suspicious of industry's motives and sceptical of existing industry practices.

### **Is There a Better Way to Obtain Community Support?**

The answer to this question is 'yes'....maybe! However, to be successful it will require industry to take some steps that it has previously been somewhat reluctant to fully commit to.

Ideally, our industries would like the community's opinions to be shaped by industry, not by other groups with their own agendas. But in order to achieve this it needs the community's trust.

This is not a new idea – it is a concept that has been promulgated by the Centre for Food Integrity in the US since 2007 (see <http://www.foodintegrity.org/>; subsequently taken up in Canada see <http://www.foodintegrity.ca/>) and adopted in a range of programs around the world.

But what are the practical steps that can be taken to build trust?

### **Building Trust**

There are a range of elements that are necessary to build trust, some of which are described below.

#### *Understand what the community's opinions and perceptions are*

It is impossible to build trust without understanding what the community's current opinions and perceptions are and what the underlying concerns and beliefs are that underpin these.

While simple attitudinal surveys are useful in helping to determine what the broader community – and not just what some vocal sub-section of it - really thinks about our industry, its practices and issues, some serious social science is required in order to get to the bottom of what the fundamental issue is in people's belief system that drives their opinions.

There may be some issues and practices that are more easily addressed than others. It is clear from a recent consumer survey undertaken by the ACMF in February 2018 that some opinions are more entrenched than others.

For example, when participants were asked whether chickens raised for meat in Australia are genetically modified in any way, the most common answer given was that the respondents really didn't know (see Figure 1 below).

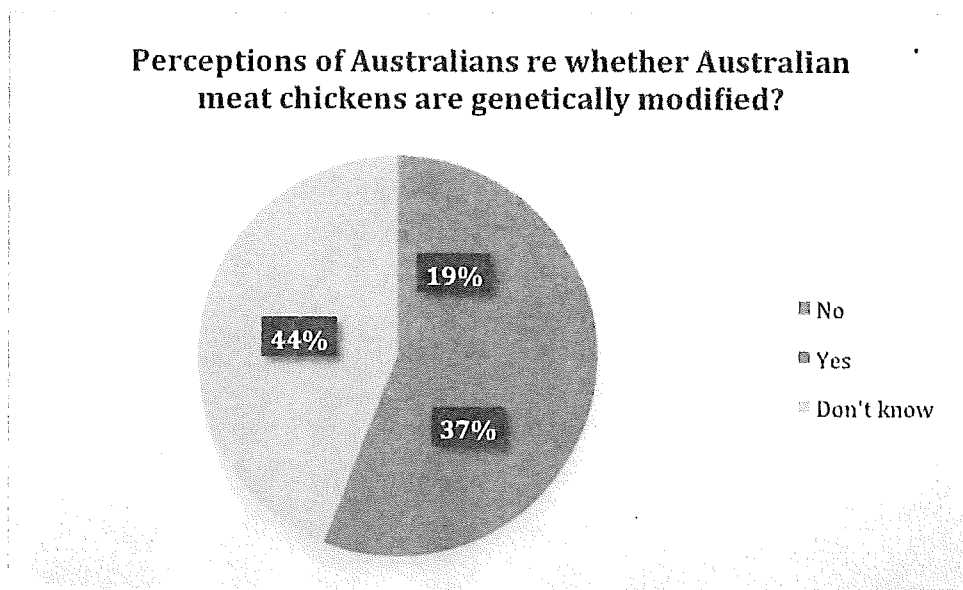


Figure 1. Australian consumers' views on whether chickens raised for meat are genetically modified

When asked what circumstances it would be appropriate for chickens to be genetically modified, more than half agreed that it would be acceptable for one or more of a range of reasons:

- 32% agreed it would be acceptable if used to improve the overall health and welfare of chickens;
- 27% said it would be acceptable to help build resistance to avian flu strains;
- 23% said to build resistance to food safety risks;
- 20% said to improve environmental sustainability;
- 19% if it would improve the nutritional value of the chicken meat; and
- 15% even believed it would be acceptable if directed towards improving chicken meat production efficiency and reducing chicken meat cost.

While 46% of respondents did not know of a reason when genetic modification of chickens would be acceptable, the above data shows that opinions are not firmly entrenched in this area, and there is some willingness in the community to consider a new technology.

On the other hand, there are some perceptions (often factually incorrect) of our industries that are deeply entrenched.

When asked what proportion of chickens in Australia that are raised to produce meat (as opposed to chickens that are raised to produce eggs) are kept in cages, the vast majority (84%) of Australians responded to the effect that 50% or more were (Figure 2).

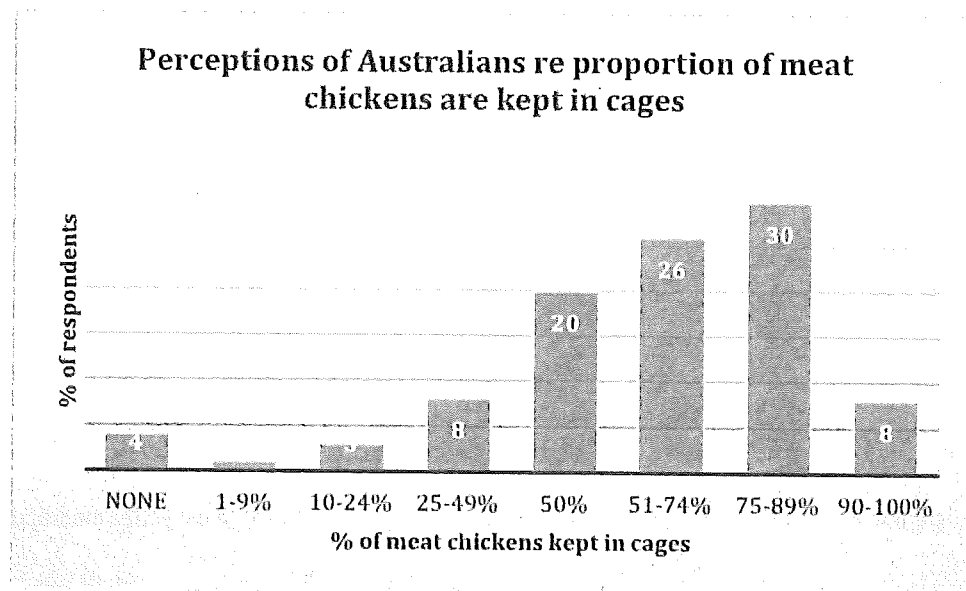


Figure 2. Perceptions of Australians regarding proportion of meat chickens kept in cages

Interestingly, only 4% of those surveyed correctly identified that cages are not used for chicken meat production in Australia, an outcome which is unchanged since a similar survey was last undertaken in 2012 (Figure 3), illustrating how largely ineffective industry's substantial efforts have been in communicating the reality of meat chicken housing practices in Australia to the community.

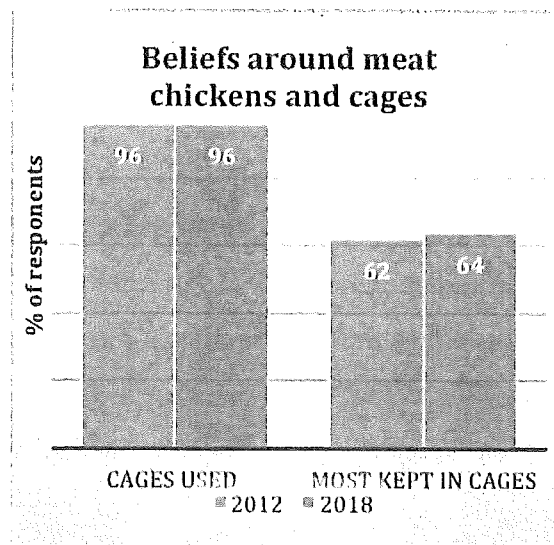


Figure 3. Perceptions of Australians regarding the use of cages for keeping meat chickens (2012 vs 2016)

### *Identify the common ground*

It's easier to start a conversation when you have a common interest. Understanding where the shared interests and shared values lie can provide the ideal starting point for a discussion around industry practices.

For example, somewhat surprisingly, the recent ACMF consumer survey found that the majority of Australian consumer (over 18 years of age) were open to the idea of antibiotics being used in meat chickens if used to protect their health and welfare:

- 56% said it was appropriate to use antibiotics to protect meat chicken health and welfare;
- of the 44% who initially said it was not appropriate, 48% of these said it was appropriate if the use posed no risk to human health;
- when asked 'in what circumstances would it be appropriate to use antibiotics in chickens produced for meat' 47% said 'to treat infections' and 44% said 'to prevent disease and infections', with views mixed on whether 'prevention is better than cure' or use in both circumstances is appropriate;
- 24% said that 'antibiotics should never be used in animals produced for food'.

From the above statistics, it is possible to see that industry's and the community's views are actually largely aligned, particularly if the issues around human safety are addressed. They also

reveal that there may be a part of the community whose beliefs and opinions may not easily be moved.

### *Engagement*

To build trust requires a dialogue to be had with the community around the issues that concern them. A good starting point is the common ground.

Engagement is not about ‘educating’ the other party; it’s about sharing and discussing the issues and concerns each party has, respecting each other’s views and agreeing where there is common interest, and perhaps even agreeing upon areas in which we cannot reconcile our respective positions.

However, compromise is also important. Compromise demonstrates respect for another’s views and beliefs which is an essential component in building trust. In entering into an engagement with the community, industry will need to accept that there will need to be some things that are done differently. That however is all part of evolution.

How this dialogue can be initiated and conducted will require some serious consideration and investment. Some models do exist, such as a successful animal welfare initiative undertaken by the German Poultry Association through 2012 and 2013 in which members of the public were publicly invited to attend open house days on a number of farms across Lower Saxony to see and discuss poultry production practices on German poultry farms. Thousands of members of the German public, including many families, took up this offer and most visitors said they had changed their mind about poultry production as a result of their experience, now believing that the birds are kept in good conditions and are well cared for by their owners.

### *Demonstrate that industry deserves the community’s trust*

This may be the most challenging hurdle for industry to come to terms with because it requires transparency and a commitment to being honest about our performance in areas that the community is acutely concerned about and to “doing what we say we do”.

#### *(a) Transparency*

One of the greatest impediments to the development and maintenance of trust is when one party appears to be hiding something. How can industry expect the community to trust it if it isn’t prepared to be open up and show its practices? This can be challenging to achieve at a practical

level, because of the physical and biosecurity challenges of permitting the public access to farms, but innovative solutions to overcoming these are available, including webcam monitoring inside poultry farms and observation windows and systems for visitors.

*(b) Do what we say we do*

Building trust is not a PR exercise; it requires changing practices and improving performance. To do this requires industry and participants in it to examine how well they do what they say they do, and ask themselves “are we really doing the right thing 100% (or at least the majority) of the time?”

Confronting and addressing the issue of performance against issues that matter to the community is perhaps one of the most challenging things for any industry to come to terms with in its engagement with the community.

Industry can't hope to build and maintain the community's trust by claiming that everything is perfect, if it isn't. If things aren't quite right, it's better to admit that there is room for improvement and commit to improvement. There are plenty of people and groups out there looking for opportunities to document any failures in performance against stated achievements.

Robust systems for verifying that we actually do what we say we do can also help to demonstrate that the community's trust is well placed.

*Can the above proposed strategy for building trust and gaining community support actually work actually work?*

Concrete examples of the strategy outlined above resulting in successful alignment of industry and community views on key issues and improved community acceptance of industry practices are difficult to find, noting that the adoption of such an approach has often only come out of a position of desperation, when all other approaches have failed and the industries affected are already teetering on the brink of losing their license to operate.

Nevertheless, examples in Australian agriculture do exist, perhaps the most successful example being the cotton industry's engagement with the community around its environmental practices and sustainability, which largely followed the principles described above and which resulted in a significant change in the public's mindset about the cotton industry. A key element of this program involved the adoption of an ambitious environmental stewardship program, underpinned by a comprehensive Best Management Practices program which was adopted across

the majority of the industry, which helped to demonstrate to the community the Australian cotton industry's improved farming practices and careful management of natural resources. Through the adoption of this program, the industry was able to achieve and demonstrate an 89% reduction in pesticide use and a 40% improvement in the efficiency of water use across the industry<sup>7</sup>. Despite the success of this program, participants in that industry will be the first to point out just how easily community trust can be eroded and how tenuous its hold on social license to operate can be, with significant damage flowing from the exposition of the failures of just one or two farmers.

Whether this approach will work in the Australian poultry industry is yet to seen, particularly as animal welfare is a whole other level of community concern and opinion. It will be interesting therefore to observe the outcomes of the implementation of the Australian egg industry's new community engagement strategy.

### **Is There a Role for Science?**

Science still has and always will have a role to play in helping to establish key benchmarks for both appropriate and best practice. Science should underpin what industry aims to achieve in its dialogue with the community and may help us decide what issues we should be prepared to compromise on and what we are prepared to defend at all costs.

### **Conclusion**

Those of us involved in the poultry industries have traditionally understood fact to equate to what is proven by hard scientific data or other 'evidence', and a fact to be something that is 'real'.

However, facts are no longer the reality we operate in. Perception is the new reality and, yes, in many areas of industry's operations, therefore, fiction has indeed become fact.

In order to successfully adapt to this new reality, we have to first accept that we are in a new operating environment - one in which we can no longer expect community acceptance; one in which we need to earn community trust, rather than assume that we will always achieve understanding and acceptance through 'education'.

Building trust requires a deep understanding of what the community's opinions and perceptions are and the underlying reasons for these, identifying common ground, shared interests and shared values, engaging with the community on the issues that concern them - even compromising in some cases, and demonstrating that the community's trust is deserved through

transparency and doing what we say we do. This is not an easy path for industry to follow, but it may be the most productive way for industry to maintain some control over the way it operates in the future.

We shouldn't think of this as 'giving in'; it's more productively thought of as 'getting on with it'.

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