

LIVE SHEEP EXPORTS: VESSEL “AL MESSILAH” RETURN TO PORT

Current Issue

A vessel carrying live sheep to the Middle East has returned to Port Adelaide after a mechanical failure damaged its primary generator. Conditions on the ship remained conducive to providing for the health and welfare of the sheep. The exporter advised on 18 August that the sheep would be unloaded and transported to an AQIS-approved registered feedlot establishment near Adelaide. The unloading commenced on 19 August and was completed by midday on Sunday 21 August. The sheep will be held under quarantine at the feedlot until they are either re-exported or sent direct to slaughter for processing in Australia.

Widespread media coverage commenced 17 August. DAFF issued a media statements on 16, 18 and 21 August. The South Australian Agriculture Minister has spoken to the media. The RSPCA, Animals Australia and the Greens have also issued media statements.

Talking Points

- The unloading of 67,000 sheep from the Al Messilah live animal export vessel was completed around midday (Sunday, 21 August).
- All sheep are off the vessel.
- The sheep have been moved to a nearby feedlot which is an AQIS-approved registered facility.
- The sheep remain in good condition following their transport to the feedlot.
- The sheep will be held under strict quarantine conditions, pending their re-export or processing within Australia.
- They will receive daily health and welfare inspections by veterinary officers from the Department of Primary Industries and Resources South Australia.
- Strict biosecurity and quarantine measures are in place at the feedlot. There will be no access given to unauthorised people or groups.

If asked - background

- The vessel returned to Port Adelaide on Friday 12 August, after experiencing mechanical failure within 24 hours of its departure. The sheep were intended for markets in s47 (1)(b) in the Middle East.
- The mechanical problem was caused by the flooding of a generator room, which led to failure of the vessel’s primary source of electrical power. Power is available from the ship’s backup generator.
- The vessel was obliged to return to Port Adelaide for both maritime safety and animal welfare reasons.
- The mechanical failure which led to the return of the Al Messilah to Port Adelaide cannot be fixed in Adelaide.
- The Animal Health Committee endorsed a risk assessment for the unloading and transport of the sheep from the vessel.
- The Animal Health Committee comprises representatives of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. The committee is working closely with industry stakeholders on this matter.
- The unloading and transport of sheep to the feedlot took three (3) days.
- The sheep will not re-enter the Australian flock. They will be either re-exported when another vessel becomes available, or they will be slaughtered for processing.

- If the vessel is used to transport live animals in the future, it must first obtain certification from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA). This certification covers the vessel's seaworthiness, and confirms that it is fit to carry livestock and maintain their health and welfare needs.
- The department will not issue an export license for any vessel until it receives an AMSA certification.
- The odour from the ship is typical of a large number of animals being housed together.
- The sheep would normally have been onboard for 20 days to reach the Middle East markets.

Mortalities

- Unfortunately, in any agriculture, feedlot or transportation situation a number of animal deaths are expected.
- Conditions on transport vessels are similar to those in feedlots and the level of expected mortalities is similar.
- All efforts were made to ensure the well-being of the sheep and minimise any losses. The sheep were under veterinary care onboard, during unloading and their transport to the feedlot.
- Sheep that were not fit for travel, were not moved to the feedlot.
- If pressed: On 20 August there were 298 deaths out of 66,918 sheep. This is 0.43% of the total consignment. This is within the normal bounds and is not unexpected.

Disposal of animal waste

- The animal waste is considered 'quarantine' waste. It will be removed from the vessel in accordance with the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock.
- If pressed: Routine procedures normally involve deep burial to prevent any pest or disease risk.

Key issues

Status of the ship

- The live animal export vessel "Al Messilah" departed Port Adelaide on 8th August 2011 carrying approximately 67,000 sheep intended for [REDACTED] s47 (1)(b) in the Middle East. The voyage was expected to take 20 days.
- A mechanical failure occurred in the Australian maritime zone on 9th August 2011. The vessel was only 24 hours into its voyage and did not leave the Australian maritime zone. The failure was caused by a crack in the steel boundary or "wall" of a tank which allowed seawater and sewage to enter a generator room.
- This led to failure of the vessel's primary source of electrical power for livestock services. Power is available from a backup generator on the ship.
- The vessel returned to Port Adelaide for maritime safety and animal welfare reasons on Friday 12th August and was initially at anchor outside the port.
- An assessment for seaworthiness was conducted by representatives from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and Lloyds Registry.
- The vessel was moved on 15 August to an outer berth in the Port where repairs continued. The owner decided on 18 August to unload the sheep and the vessel was moved to an inner berth for this to occur.

- The veterinarian accompanying the sheep reported their continuing good health and maintenance of satisfactory conditions for their welfare.

DAFF's Risk Assessment and risk management measures

- Animal Health Committee, with relevant industry representatives, met by teleconference on 10 August 2011 to discuss this incident. AHC requested that a risk assessment concerning the welfare and health of the sheep on the "Al Messilah" be undertaken by DAFF in case the vessel could not be repaired on arrival in Port Adelaide.
- It was confirmed that all previous shipments by the "Al Messilah" undertaken in the last three months were only Australian animals and only Australian origin fodder was taken on board. The Master of the vessel has also advised that no animals were loaded onto the vessel in the past 6 months at any place other than Australia. DAFF's risk assessment identified animal pests and diseases of potential concern, exposure pathways, and concluded the risk to be minimal.
- The assessment focussed on transfer of the animals to an AQIS-approved registered feedlot establishment located [REDACTED] s47G(1)(a) [REDACTED]. It is intended that the consignment be re-exported in 3-4 weeks or that the sheep be slaughtered at a nearby abattoir for processing for human consumption. The sheep will not re-enter the Australian flock.
- Risk management measures apply at the vessel, during transport, and at the feedlot while it is occupied by the returned sheep. These include, but are not limited to:
 - At the port: exclusion of other ruminant animals; disposal of animal waste; and cleaning and disinfection of the wharf area after the animals have departed;
 - During transport to and from the feedlot: selection of transport routes; monitoring of each transport vehicle;
 - At the feedlot: daily official animal health inspections, disposal of animal waste; and decontamination of the feedlot after the departure of all animals.
- Animal Health Committee, with relevant industry representatives, met by teleconference on 11 August 2011 and endorsed the risk assessment and risk management plan.

Unloading the sheep

- The health and welfare of the sheep from the vessel continues to be fully satisfactory.
- There have been 298 sheep mortalities (as of 20 August) which represents 0.43 per cent. This level of mortality lies within normally experienced bounds, and is not unexpected.
- DAFF issued an import permit to allow the sheep to be unloaded and moved to the feedlot. The South Australian government issued a livestock movement restriction order so they are held in quarantine at the feedlot till they are re-exported (or move direct to slaughter for processing in Australia).
- Unloading commenced around 7am on Friday 19 August.
- There were 6 trucks in total moving the sheep (in 12 hour shifts per day). The South Australian road management authority assisted with traffic control to expedite the movement of the trucks to the feedlot.
- The department coordinated the supervision of the unloading and supervision under quarantine at the feedlot with the South Australian government.
- RSCPA were granted a court order to observe the unloading at the wharf.

- The sheep are now being held under quarantine conditions at the feedlot pending their re-export or slaughter for processing within Australia.
- Sheep were screened before discharge by DAFF vets. Animals with inanition were identified. On arrival at feedlot these identified animals are moved to a treatment pen.
- Mortalities cannot be removed from vessel over weekend. They have been bagged and placed in quarantine bins that will be removed at 6am Monday.
- The unloading was completed around midday on Sunday 21 August.
- The cleanup of the wharf area is under way - dismantling temporary yards and shade on wharf, removal of sand brought in to aid animal movement, wash down of wharf. Trucks are being disinfected.
- Unloading figures follow:
- Friday between 7 am and 7 pm - 28,146 and 26 rejects for treatment. Saturday between 7am and 7 pm - 27,752 and 68 rejects for treatment. Sunday between 7am and 12:30pm 10,669 and 58 rejects for treatment. Total 66,719 including 152 rejects that are under treatment at the feedlot for sore eyes.

Media Interest

- There is a moderate level of media interest (that commenced 17 August).
- Police security was at the wharf to prevent general public access.
- Around 400 protesters were reported late in the day at the wharf entrance on 20 August.
- DAFF issued media statements on 16, 18 and 21 August.
- The South Australian Agriculture Minister spoke to the media on 17 August.
- DAFF's Acting Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO), Dr Mark Schipp, has been contacted by the CEO of Animals Australia who said they had been alerted that this vessel had been loaded but remained in port for a week. The CVO provided assurances that the animals were healthy and well, with both onboard veterinarian and daily AQIS veterinary supervision. We aware that Animals Australia has rung several others in the department and also industry bodies. The CVO spoke to a number of media outlets on 19 and 21 August.
- The RSPCA also contacted DAFF regarding the vessel and released a statement on 16 August. Animal Australia and the Greens have also issued statements.

Contacts

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