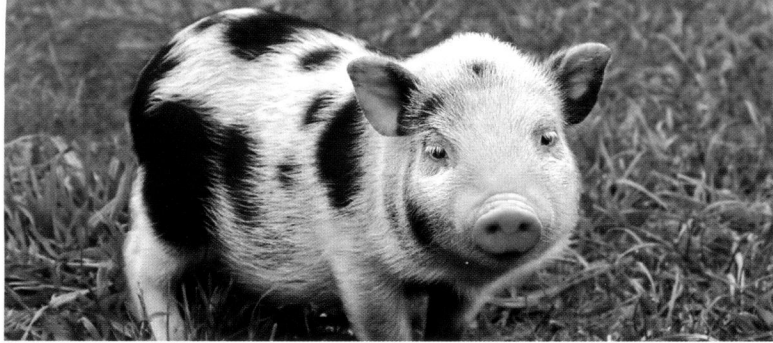


# Poor little porkers



THE decision by supermarket chain Coles to make its pork products 'sow stall free' shows the retail industry won't wait for government action on public concerns, according to a leading animal law expert.

The supermarket giant will retail only free-range pork products from 2014 in a bid to stem animal cruelty, a move applauded by animal rights campaigners nationwide.

TLG Lawyers animal law consultant Steven White, who is writing his PhD on the regulation of the treatment of companion and farmed animals in Australia, says the action taken by Coles shows the Federal Government is 'not keeping pace on a range of public issues'.

"Coles has basically responded to pressure from consumers. The public has indicated that they're unhappy with the practice of pig stalls and as such the retailer was under pressure about where it sources its meat products," says White.

"It really is another example of parliament and politicians not keeping up with public concerns. It's been left up to the retail industry to act rather than agriculture ministers and other political figures taking action first."

White says the Animal Cruelty Act condemns cruelty to animals and states that animals are owed a duty of care; however it also includes exemptions in the case where generally accepted codes of practice are being used.

The Code of Practice for Pigs was recently revised however it will not be mandated until 2017.

While Coles is acting ahead of this timeline by effectively putting a ban on its non-compliant suppliers from 2014, White is frustrated with the lengthy processes. He is also displeased with the revisions set to be implemented in 2017, not aligning with common international standards.

Animals Australia has sought to raise awareness about the mistreatment of pigs for years.

The 2017 timeframe for the code of practice revisions shows the industry is falling behind overseas counterparts. But executive director Glenys Oogjes says Coles has set an animal welfare benchmark and hopes other retailers will follow suit.

"It is terrific to see Coles responding to community concerns and proactively working with their suppliers to improve animal welfare standards," says Oogjes.

"Coles, Woolworths and the other major retailers through their buying power have the ability to significantly improve the standards of care for animals raised for food in Australia.

"Cruel production methods, such as the use of sow stalls have continued in Australia only because consumers have been unaware of the conditions and practices that animals endure.

"We applaud Coles for showing ethical leadership and being the first Australian retailer to act to end one of the cruellest practices ever inflicted on animals in Australia."

White expects industry pressure from the supermarkets to trickle down the supply chain faster than government reform, but sees a slight glimmer of hope.

"The Federal Government is currently working with the states on revising industry codes of practices, but the problem is there are a large number of them and each requires a long process to revise and update," he says.

"The Tasmanian Government announced in June that it has decided to restrict sow stalls from 2014 and fully ban them from 2017. This places Tasmania well ahead of other jurisdictions, including Queensland.

"It is a long time particularly for the animals that will experience intolerable cruelty over that period, but the argument is that farmers have put a lot of money into establishing current practices and it will take time and money to change these."

Animal protection institute Voiceless states the following standards will be implemented in the 2017 Code of Practice for Pigs revision - well below international standards.

- Until 2017 at least, pregnant pigs will be permitted to be confined for the duration of their 16 week pregnancy in individual sow stalls, measuring no more than 0.6 x 2.2m. These stalls have been associated with physical disorders, chronic stress and depression and are so small that female pigs cannot even turn around.
- Sow stalls are already banned in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and Finland. They are also banned in many US states and two of the largest pork producers in the US and Canada recently announced plans to phase the practice out.
- From about 2017, the maximum time for holding pregnant pigs in sow stalls will reduce to six weeks. This is two weeks more than the minimum standard being introduced by the European Union and New Zealand.
- Heavily pregnant and nursing sows will be confined for up to six weeks of each reproductive cycle in farrowing crates, before their young are prematurely weaned. These crates, which measure 0.5 x 2.2m, are even smaller than sow stalls.
- Pig producers will not be obligated to provide access to the outdoors where pigs can engage in natural behaviour and the animals can be kept on nothing more than concrete floors for their entire lives.



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