

Livestock body faces axe over export row

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An alliance of beef producers and processors will call for the abolition of Meat and Livestock Australia, after the scandal surrounding live export to Indonesia this year.

A motion will be put to the MLA's annual general meeting in Longreach on Thursday to wind up the producer-owned company, while a call for wide-ranging reforms in the industry, including the abolition of its peak advisory council, is expected from another group.

Critics within the beef and sheep industry say the current 15-year old structure is out of date and lacks transparency and accountability.

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The Australian Beef Association said it had well over the 100 signatures required from MLA members to table the wind-up motion at this year's AGM, after a similar attempt last year failed.

The association's president, Brad Bellinger, said the MLA had failed in its duty to promote and service the industry, with cattle prices stagnant over the past 10 years while the price of beef to the consumer had risen by 50 per cent. At the same time the demand for beef had dropped 20 per cent.

MLA is funded by a \$5 per head levy from beef producers, processors and exporters every time an animal changes hands, totalling \$70 million in revenue a year.

It also receives \$38 million annually from government sources for research and development.

"MLA is not putting any benefit back to cattle producers who fund the [company]," Mr Bellinger said. "The supermarkets are the only ones benefiting from MLA ... because its assumption that if consumers paid more for their beef the producers would get more hasn't panned out."

Mr Bellinger said that, despite MLA spending \$25 million on animal welfare programs in south-east Asia since 2005, all the company had to show for it was stunning equipment in four Indonesian abattoirs and the introduction of slaughtering boxes.

The boxes featured prominently in an ABC expose on the treatment of exported Australian cattle in Indonesian abattoirs earlier this year, resulting in a month-long suspension of live export in the region.

Norman Hunt, the spokesman for another alliance, the Australian Meat Producers Group, said it would use Thursday's AGM to call for long overdue wide-ranging reforms, including the abolition of the Red Meat Advisory Council, which lobbies governments.

A proposal is expected to be tabled calling for the end of MLA's "one stop shop" structure, divesting the company of its power by creating separate statutory funded corporations for beef producers, sheep meat producers, meat processors, lotfeeders and exporters, in much the same way the pork and egg industries now operate.

The group also wants the government-funded research and development arm of MLA transferred to a new independent and publicly accountable body.

On the ABA's call for MLA to be wound up, an MLA spokeswoman said the ABA had continued to misrepresent MLA as a lobby group.

"[MLA's] charter is strictly limited to the provision of marketing and research and development services to the red meat industry," she said. "It is disappointing that our members will be asked to vote again on the same resolution that was defeated last year."

A spokeswoman for the federal Minister for Agriculture, Joe Ludwig, said questions about the beef industry's structure were regularly raised by industry players.

"This is a good thing. It is healthy for industry to have these debates," she said. "I am not going to speculate on any particular proposals."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/animals/livestock-body-faces-axe-over-export-row-20111114-1nfhc.html#ixzz1djsD2K9r>