

Ludwig warned of cattle ban dangers

Sophie Morris

Federal Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig was warned by his department two days before he suspended cattle sales to Indonesia the decision could hurt the welfare of hundreds of thousands of cattle and cost producers.

The government may face lawsuits from cattle exporters over its handling of the export crisis, which was triggered by the broadcast by ABC television's *Four Corners* program a year ago of disturbing footage of slaughter practices in Indonesia.

Documents released under Freedom of Information laws reveal Senator Ludwig requested advice from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry on the welfare consequences of stopping the live trade.

The department told him in June, two days before he announced the immediate suspension of exports, that 376,000 feeder cattle were being prepared for export and could not be sold to other markets.

"If the Indonesia trade was stopped the strong relative value of the dollar plus the fact that these are feeder animals, not ideal for immediate slaughter, means that it is unlikely these cattle could be diverted to other destinations," the urgent departmental briefing said.

"Producers do not have the feed reserves to hold all these animals for the remainder of the dry season without creating a serious on-farm problem. If there is overstocking animals do die."

"Even if there was capacity in domestic feedlots, the cattle would need to be transported long distances with resultant potential welfare risks."

The briefing warned of the strain a suspension of trade would place on the Northern Territory government, communities and cattle producers.

The government's budget papers acknowledge it "may become liable for compensation following the decision



XXXX Gold makes Victoria bitter

Queensland's mid-strength XXXX Gold has become the nation's biggest selling beer, overtaking Victoria Bitter for the first time in April. Nielsen says VB sales dipped to 12.3 per cent of total beer sales while XXXX Gold was steady at 12.4 per cent. VB is made by Foster's Group while Lion makes XXXX Gold.

Julie-anne Sprague. Photo: Glenn Hunt

by [Senator Ludwig] to suspend the export of livestock to Indonesia for a period of one month in 2011".

Two groups of cattle producers are seeking compensation.

The department has in recent months released multiple documents relating to live cattle exports. They reveal the RSPCA told Senator Ludwig in December 2010 that Australian cattle faced "pain fear and distress" during slaughter in Indonesia.

The RSPCA made these comments in response to a report commissioned by the industry which had found that

"animal welfare was generally good and that Australian cattle in Indonesia were generally coping well with the conditions to which they were exposed".

Another briefing reveals the department briefed Senator Ludwig on the ABC footage two weeks before it was broadcast to allow "sufficient time to consult with your colleagues, including possibly with Cabinet".

Senator Ludwig came under pressure over his initial slowness to act after the footage was broadcast and his subsequent decision to suspend

live cattle exports to Indonesia without warning.

Senator Ludwig last night defended the suspension. "It was not an easy decision to make, but it was the right one. Suspending trade for a short term was the only way to secure a trade in the long term," he said.

Indonesia has since boosted effort to expand its own cattle herd. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono yesterday asked ANZ chief executive Mike Smith for help boosting investment in the Indonesian cattle industry as it strives for self-sufficiency.