Sheep Updates 2008 - part 1

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Animal welfare – trends and opportunities
Tony Higgs & Di Evans, Department of Agriculture and Food WA

ABSTRACT
Animal welfare has emerged as a major challenge for Australian agriculture in the 21st century. Retailers and consumers, particularly overseas, are demanding higher standards that have evoked significant industry reaction, which in some cases have led to division within industry. However, a systematic approach involving risk assessment, implementation of changes and quality control programs will greatly assist in helping the industry prepare for future welfare issues.

INTRODUCTION
There has been an unprecedented level of activity on animal welfare on a State and national level in the past four years. The main reason welfare has emerged as a major issue is because of international attention and, in particular, retailer and consumer reaction in response to campaigns by animal advocacy groups. Livestock industries face a difficult challenge as the retail end of the food production chain view farming practices very differently from livestock producers. This has occurred partly due to the ‘population disconnection’ where there is very limited awareness and understanding of urban populations about livestock husbandry and management. However, general awareness by consumers is increasing as they are now being shown graphic images of specific practices which have until now not been in public view. Over the past 10 years, agriculture has been intensely scrutinised creating some concerns amongst consumers. An important trend influencing this scrutiny is the growing recognition that all animals are sentient, which means that they can feel pain and experience fear, and therefore have the capacity to suffer. As a consequence of this increased awareness, animal welfare is becoming an important component of consumer purchasing choices. In 2006, the Eurobarometer survey revealed that EU citizens ranked animal welfare highly, giving it an average of 8 out of 10 in terms of importance, and 89% thought that imports should be produced under the same or higher animal welfare conditions as those applying in the EU (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm).

Other changes occurring on the global stage have important implications for Australia. In 2002, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) expanded its activities to include animal welfare and in 2007 it was resolved that there be a Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare (www.oie.int). It should be noted that despite increasing pressure to implement dramatic changes in relatively short time frames, it is acknowledged by the OIE that incremental change is a more appropriate approach (1).

Current issues
Some animal welfare issues are unique to Australia, whilst others are not dissimilar to those in other parts of the world and include:

- Mulesing
- Live export by sea;
- Long-haul transport (including curfews, stocking densities, stock-handling);
- Surgical husbandry procedures (including dehorning, spaying, castration);
- Drought management (including nutrition, humane destruction).

Risk assessments of live export and long-haul transport indicate that they are very high risk welfare areas based on current public focus and potential impact of change. Both are being closely scrutinised as the potential impact of restriction or cessation of these activities would have a profound effect on Australia’s livestock industries. If livestock exports ceased, the northern cattle industry would struggle to survive, as it is highly dependent on the export market.

HOW CAN INDUSTRY RESPOND TO THESE ISSUES?
Successful industry management of key welfare issues includes the following:

1. Assess animal welfare risks;
2. Address the key risks in consultation with a range of stakeholders;
3. Assure customers of high standards.

1. **Assessing animal welfare risks**

Assessing animal welfare is not easy and varies depending on experiences, beliefs and perspectives. One of the earliest definitions is that animal welfare is ‘the state of an animal in its attempt to cope with its environment’ (2). One of the reasons why a consistent understanding is needed for the term ‘animal welfare’ is that it is an evolving area particularly in terms of the potential impact on animals and the development of objective methods to assess welfare.

Conventional thinking in some realms is that animal welfare requirements encompass meeting basic animal needs in relation to state of mind (fear), body functions (growth, reproduction, and immunity to disease) and nature (natural environment and behaviour). Considering this, there has been much debate regarding the most appropriate methods of assessing welfare. Scientists have been divided regarding the validity of various parameters including physiological, biological or behavioural measures. Recently, there has been increasing acknowledgement that a multidisciplinary approach needs to be adopted to be able to make critical welfare assessments.

2. **What do we know?**

**Stock-handling practices**

Significant research over the past 20 years in Australia has shown repeatedly that poor stock-handling practices in both the dairy and pig industry create high levels of fear in animals which has a profound negative impact on productivity (3). Even routine, mildly aversive practices such as shouting, slaps and taps using poly pipe have been shown to induce fear and therefore stress in stock. Fear levels can be assessed by measuring flight distance (the distance a human can approach before an animal moves away) or approach times to humans (the time taken for an animal to approach a stationary human observer). High fear levels are indicated by long flight distances and long approach times. Hemsworth et al (4) found that on farms where breeding sows were highly fearful of humans, the total number of pigs born and weaned per sow per litter per year was significantly less. On other farms, growth rates were also lower where fear levels were higher. Similar trends have also been reported on dairy farms where milk yields are reduced on farms where cows are fearful. Interestingly, where stock-handling training has been introduced using cognitive behavioural therapy, increases in productivity have been achieved. The ProHand Pig and ProHand Dairy training programs developed by Hemsworth and Coleman of the Animal Welfare Science Centre, based in Victoria, have improved attitudes and behaviours of stock-handlers with subsequent improvements in productivity (www.animalwelfare.net.au).

**Electric prodders**

US animal behaviourist, Temple Grandin has emphasized the need to eliminate the use of electric prodders. Studies have shown that bellowing by cattle, considered to be an indicator of stress, can be significantly reduced from 50% to 20% at establishments where electric prodder use was reduced and after just 15 minutes of instruction on cattle handling, electric prodder use was reduced from 64% to 16% (5). It has been shown that trained cattle handlers can move large numbers of animals efficiently without the use of electric prodders. The use of electric prodders is also strongly discouraged in the Meat Standards Australia™ beef program, where it states ‘Load cattle quietly, preferably with no use of goads and electric prodders (6). This recommendation was first made in 2000.

The question is, given this evidence, what is holding industry back from supporting competent stock handling being a mandatory requirement and electric prodder use being phased out?

3. **Address the key risks**

Once welfare issues are identified, the next step is to develop solutions to resolve them.

Options to address welfare concerns:

1. Management change (e.g. avoid mulesing through strategic shearing, crutching and/or jetting);
2. Genetic selection (e.g. dehorning avoided with polled breeds; low breech strike susceptible breeds of sheep; disease resistance – fleece rot);
3. Education and training (e.g. National Mulesing Accreditation Program, Low Stress Stock-handling);
4. New technology (e.g. use of pain relief; better yard design).

**Live Export Stock-handling Training Program**

Education and training is recognized as a key activity that can dramatically improve animal welfare. If competency based and assessed, it also provides a valuable opportunity for industry to demonstrate high standards through up-skilling and/or recognition of existing skills. DAFWA has worked closely with the live export industry to develop a practical stock-handling program for stevedores, livestock depot workers and transporters. The training program has been well received by LiveCorp which currently provides a $250 subsidy to participants.

**Use of pain relief**

The focus on mulesing and pain relief (7) has extended to consideration of other surgical husbandry procedures including tail docking, de-horning and castration. For example, pain relief is considered essential for de-horning calves (8) or specific techniques may be preferred over others. An example is the use of rubber rings and local anaesthetic for castrating lambs rather than surgical or clamp castration (9).

Over the past few years, the use of needle-less technology to deliver therapeutic compounds has been examined and may provide practical and safe options. The trend appears to be clear in that the challenge ahead will be to review and refine many practices that are currently regarded as standard.

4. **Assure customers of high standards**

There are two broad categories in which standards apply:

1. Legislative (Acts, Regulations and Codes of Practice); and
2. Market driven (quality assurance programs, accreditation of operators).

The main difference between these two systems is that the first relies upon a breach occurring before action is taken, whereas market driven audit systems rely upon continuous monitoring and maintenance of specified standards. In addition, the penalty for failing the audit system is that market access may be denied which is a very strong incentive to comply. Also, an audit system can use legislative standards as the base level. However, legislative standards may not be sufficiently high to meet customer expectations.

**Legislative standards**

In Western Australia, animal welfare standards are governed by the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* (the Act), *Animal Welfare (General) Regulations 2003* and over 20 welfare Codes of Practice. Currently, non-compliance with welfare Codes is not a breach of the Act but can be used as a defence against a charge of cruelty. However, Codes will progressively be replaced by Standards and Guidelines with Standards being mandatory (non-compliance will be a breach of the Act) and Guidelines will be acknowledged as best practice. The first Codes to be converted to Standards and Guidelines are those for the transport of livestock.

**Market driven standards**

Increasing public awareness and concern in relation to animal production systems has alerted retailers to the need to ensure that products meet certain standards. In December 2007, Marks and Spencer was awarded ‘Compassionate Supermarket of the Year’ by leading UK animal advocate group, Compassion in World Farming, an achievement which they promote (www.marksandspencer.com). For over 10 years, US fast food retailer McDonald’s Corporation has conducted handling and stunning audits at beef slaughter plants. By doing this, McDonald’s is able to provide an assurance to its customers. It has been shown that audits of this type result in improvements in animal welfare and productivity (10).

**CONCLUSION**

There has been much change in the past 10 years in relation to animal welfare. No longer is welfare considered just in terms of prevention of cruelty. New paradigms have emerged in that welfare is now assessed in relation to meeting the biological and psychological needs of animals. Ethical production systems are being developed and include key areas such as stockmanship (11), surgical husbandry procedures and slaughter practices. To maintain market access, these aspects are becoming an
integral part of quality assurance. In some instances there is a double benefit as productivity can also increase as a result of changes that improve welfare.

Paper reviewed by: Michael Paton, Senior Veterinary Officer, DAFWA

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Australia’s live sheep exports to Saudi Arabia.
Scott Hansen, Meat & Livestock Australia

SUMMARY
There is increasing pressure from animal activists to cease Australian livestock exports and for the trade to be replaced by chilled and frozen meat. This paper presents evidence that shows livestock exports cannot be readily replaced by boxed meat and outlines why a simplistic shutdown of the live sheep export trade is likely to have serious ramifications for Western Australian producers and rural communities.

This paper looks at trade data from the past decade to the largest Middle East market, Saudi Arabia, to analyse the drivers for demand for live sheep imports to that market, and the degree of substitution that has occurred between the boxed and live sheep trade during periods when the live trade has been stopped. It also draws on an economic analysis completed in 2007 of the current contribution of the livestock export industry to the Australian economy, and the short, medium and long-term impact on regional economies if the livestock export trade ceased.

BACKGROUND
Despite recognition that “Australia has world-best livestock export standards in terms of coverage and capacity to deliver acceptable outcomes”, with over 99% of all sheep shipped arriving fit and well at their destination, there are continued calls from animal activists for the closure of the trade. Those advocating a closure point to an increasing boxed meat trade with Middle East markets and claim that the live trade could be replaced by product processed in Australia.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is the largest market for the live sheep trade from Western Australia (WA), and its periodic closure over the past decade provides a valuable insight into the relationship between meat exports and livestock exports during a period when livestock exports temporarily ceased.

Figure 1. Australian exports to Saudi Arabia

In 1999, Australia exported 22,887 tonnes (shipped weight) of mutton and lamb to Saudi Arabia while a ban of shipments of live sheep to this market was in place. When the ban was lifted in 2000 and live sheep exports to Saudi Arabia recommenced, the pace of growth in sheepmeat exports actually increased, and in 2001, when there were 2.14 million sheep being exported to Saudi Arabia, Australian sheepmeat exports to this market also peaked at 32,030 tonnes (shipped weight).

This suggests that rather than being substitutes, live sheep and boxed sheepmeat are complimentary in the market place.
This hypothesis was reinforced between 2003 and 2005 when a second hiatus in the export of livestock to Saudi Arabia saw Australia’s sheepmeat exports plummet, and again, once live sheep exports recommenced in 2005, sheepmeat exports recovered and continued to grow.

During halts in the trade the customers of our live sheep and cattle have turned to alternative suppliers of livestock, such as North Africa, China and South America, rather than to Australian exporters of meat.

The majority of the replacement sheep come from North Africa and other Middle East countries, from which reliable export data is not publicly available. Customers in Saudi Arabia extended their reach to South America during the last absence of Australian sheep in their market, with data from Uruguay showing sheep exports to Saudi Arabia grow from nil in 2002 to a peak of just under 600,000 in 2004 when Australian shipments ceased.

*Figure 2. Live sheep exports to Saudi Arabia*

What drives the demand for live animals?

Religious rituals are by far the most significant driver of demand for live sheep in Saudi Arabia. The annual Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is the largest annual pilgrimage in the world, with over two million pilgrims estimated to have participated in 2007.

The pilgrimage occurs from the tenth to the fifteenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah – the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. In 2007, the Hajj took place from 17–21 December. The next Hajj is expected from 6–9 December 2008, with *Eid ul-Adha* occurring around 8 December. These dates are determined by the movement of the moon, and the festivals fall 10-12 days earlier each year due to the Islamic calendar being shorter than the Gregorian calendar used by most western societies.

Pilgrims join processions of hundreds of thousands of people who simultaneously converge on Mecca for the week of the Hajj, and perform a series of rituals.

One of these rituals, *Eid ul-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice)*, requires pilgrims to sacrifice an animal – most commonly sheep. Traditionally the pilgrims would slaughter the animal themselves or witness the slaughtering by someone else; today centralised butcher houses established in Mecca will sacrifice a single sheep for each pilgrim, then package the meat and donate it to charity.

The graph below shows the impact of this single festival on demand of sheep from Australia. The trend is clear: export numbers increase significantly in the months leading up to the Hajj period and *Eid Festival* as Saudi Arabian authorities source livestock from around the globe.
While the ritual has evolved from requiring each pilgrim to conduct the slaughter themselves to allowing the slaughter to be performed by trained slaughtermen in Mecca, it is highly unlikely that our halal processed sheepmeat will ever replace the requirement for supply of live animals for such rituals.

The impact of losing the livestock export trade in WA

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) recently released a report on Australia’s live animal exports. It comments that “If Australia ceases to ship live cattle and sheep to south east Asia and to the Middle East, there is likely to be a significant effect on some of the regional economies of Western Australia and the Northern Territory…”

What is known is that the removal of Australian livestock from current export markets would result in alternate/replacement supply of livestock from countries such as North Africa and South America.

A research report commissioned by MLA in 2007 to investigate the value of the livestock export industry to regional Australia, and to the short, medium and long-term impacts on regional economies if there were to be a cessation of the livestock export trade, has made an attempt at quantifying the effects.

Based on the average sheep exports from WA over the five years to 2005-06, it was calculated that the trade had a gross farm gate value of $172.7 million and created 4,118 jobs on a full time equivalent basis.

The authors found that the cessation of the live sheep trade would have a “calamitous effect in southern WA”. Producers would be faced with the options of:

- Selling sheep for processing locally – leading to a market oversupply and depressing prices;
- Holding sheep on-farm – with the significant increase in costs of turning crops over for grazing or using the grain harvested for supplementary feeding;
- Transporting sheep to eastern states for slaughter – with potential costs in the range $18–22 per head, and this in turn impacting on South Australian and Victorian markets; or
- Destroying sheep – with market options severely limited and no capacity to hold the sheep over the summer and autumn periods, the only option for many producers would be to destroy a large proportion of their flock.

The report estimated that the cessation of the live sheep trade would reduce the on-farm incomes of WA sheep producers by $149 million in the first year of closure, and continue to reduce on-farm income by $104 million by year ten.
CONCLUSION

The cessation of the live sheep export trade would represent the loss of a significant market for Western Australian producers, and in turn impact on the health of the Australian livestock industry as a whole.

Trade data from the period during which the Saudi Arabian market was closed previously suggests that customers of Australian live sheep are most likely to turn to other livestock exporting countries to fill the gap, rather than to Australian meat exporters to replace the live animals with a boxed or carcase product. The significance of the religious requirement for live animals in Saudi supports the hypothesis that the replacement of the live trade with a carcase trade is unlikely, and that on the main, these are two different market segments within Saudi Arabia.

It is therefore vital that, while Australia invests in growing demand for its chilled and frozen sheepmeat products in the region, it must also work to maintain access to live sheep export markets.

KEY WORDS
Live sheep exports, Saudi Arabia, sheepmeat exports

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Paper reviewed by:

REFERENCES
Livestock Welfare Challenges in Road Transport
Dr Michael Paton, Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia

SUMMARY
Western Australia has some unique challenges to ensure that livestock are transported in a way that protects their welfare. Welfare Standards for the transport of livestock have been agreed nationally with input from a very large number of stakeholders. These Standards will be regulated and cover all livestock species. Western Australia is unique in Australia in that in most years over half a million sheep and cattle are transported more than 24 hours for slaughter. The Western Australian livestock industries and stakeholders in livestock welfare can work cooperatively to ensure that new regulated Standards for livestock transport are met and the welfare of our livestock is protected.

BACKGROUND
Since the mid 1980s a series of Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals have served as reference documents and legislative tools to help ensure the welfare of livestock in Australia. Increased expectations of livestock welfare by our trading partners and the Australian public have led to a need to develop higher quality Codes through a more transparent process. The body responsible for these Codes, the Australian Animal Welfare Working Group (the Working Group), and Australian Governments embarked on a process of reviewing and redesigning the output of welfare Code design.

Livestock industries and Governments agreed that a desirable outcome would be to have consistent high quality livestock welfare Standards for all Australian jurisdictions. It was acknowledged that, to do this, input from a wide range of stakeholders was required, as were other options for improvement. Agreement by governments and industry on the main elements of an ideal future process for revising and developing a new approach to livestock welfare has been tested in the development of the first set of Standards and Guidelines which is for the Land Transport of Livestock in Australia.

Several livestock industries have made significant progress in developing quality assurance programs that incorporate livestock welfare requirements. The new Standards and Guidelines will be closely aligned with the relevant requirements of industry quality assurance programs.

For each species or enterprise, the requirements designated as ‘musts’ in the existing Codes will form the basis for the new Australian Welfare Standards. These Standards will be written in a way that allows them to be mandated as regulations in State jurisdictional legislation. The remainder of the Codes will be included as Guidelines in the combined document Australian Standards and Guidelines for the Welfare of Livestock [species or enterprise].

STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT
Process
Animal Health Australia (AHA) and the Working Group, liaise with industry to establish a priority order for the re-formating and review of the existing welfare Model Codes of Practice. The result of this consultation is that a plan, an outline of the proposed Standards and, if necessary, a communications strategy are produced. A short list of members for the Writing Group, research and consultation services, Standards Reference Group (the Reference Group) are drafted.

AHA and the Working Group then establishes a primary Standards Writing Group (the Writing Group), manages the project plan and communications strategy, appoints project consultants, appoints a consultant to manage the public consultation process, appoints a consultant to manage the Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS), and consults with the Office of Best Practice Review (OBPR).

Under the guidance of the Writing Group, an initial draft Standards and Guidelines document is written incorporating SRG guidance. Each Standards and Guidelines document will comprise two main parts:

Standards — The acceptable animal welfare requirements designated in the document. The requirements that must be met under law for livestock welfare purposes.

Guidelines — Recommended practices to achieve desirable animal welfare outcomes. The Guidelines complement the Standards. They should be used as guidance. Guidelines use the word ‘should’. Non-compliance with one or more guidelines will not in itself constitute an offence under law.
The Writing Group seeks solutions to issues by collaboration and consensus as far as possible. The Writing Group and AHA consider the Reference Groups’ comments, and prepare a second draft of the Standards document for consideration by the Reference Group. This draft is then made available for 60 days on the AHA’s website, for public consultation and comment. The consultant for the public consultation process prepares a summary of survey and written submissions.

Unresolved issues, assessed to require further attention, are subjected to a small group collaborative process to seek a solution. The Writing Group makes final decisions on these issues.

After this process, the final draft Standards and RIS are recommended by the Reference Group to industry and government. The proposed standards and RIS are then submitted ultimately to Primary Industries Ministerial Council for endorsement.

**Livestock Transport Risks**

The most obvious risk for livestock transport in Australia is the vast distances which animals are often transported. The most important risk of transport over long distances is the time that livestock are removed from access to water. High quality research done in Australia has underpinned the Standards agreed to on this important issue.

Special provisions need to be made for animals at higher risk of suffering harm as a result of transport. The categories of stock for which special provisions are made include young stock as well as late pregnant and other stock whose health is compromised in some way.

**Livestock Transport Standards**

A key element of the new Standards and Guidelines for the Land Transport of Livestock is defining the responsibilities of different parties in the sometimes complex operation of transporting livestock from one location to another. The Standards also defines various aspects of fitness for transport, acceptable journey times or, more practically, the maximum times that an animal should be withheld from water and feed. The maximum time that adult sheep and cattle can be withheld from water is proposed to be 48 hours. The times after which stock must be unloaded and given access to water and food or “spells” are also described.

Planning and contingency issues are also defined, as is the need for detailed planning for the journey including accounting for predicted weather and road conditions. Important aspects of interventions such as humane slaughter are also outlined.

**OUTCOME**

**Process**

The Standards and Guidelines for Land Transport of Livestock were strongly supported as the highest priority for development. This decision was based on risks such as those already discussed and a pending campaign by the international animal welfare organisation World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) against “long haul” livestock transport.

In 2008 it is intended that the process for developing these Standards will be agreed to and the progression of their adoption into State legislation will begin.

**Difficult Issues**

The development of the Standards and Guidelines for Land Transport of Livestock presents particular challenges compared to other Standards and Guidelines that will follow in the future. As it is a multi-species document the list of stakeholders has been large and thus gaining consensus on all issues has been complex. An ideal model for a Standards Working Group is a small group which can manage the technical development of the Standards and Guidelines document, but with the size of the stakeholder group it was impossible to get broad representation from industry or other groups on this body. As a result of this difficulty the Reference Group has played a larger role in the development of the document. It has been this group that has gained consensus on difficult issues. The Writing Group has had a relatively minor role in the process of developing the Standards and Guidelines for Land Transport of Livestock.
The Standards and Guidelines for Land Transport of Livestock is the first to be developed with the new process. Its complexity has meant that the process has taken longer than anticipated and has been difficult to manage in terms of issue resolution, time management and funding. The learnings from this experience are likely to be of considerable value in streamlining the development of future Standards and Guidelines documents.

CONCLUSION

Promoting Stakeholder Engagement

The development of the current Standards and Guidelines for Land Transport of Livestock has channelled stakeholder input through a very large Standards Reference Group. This has lead to very complex processes of issue solution. Key stakeholders will have to be prepared to focus much of their input through membership of the Writing Group in the development of subsequent Standards and Guidelines.

Challenges for Livestock Transport

One of the challenges following the process of public consultation for the Standards and Guidelines for Land Transport of Livestock is to adapt Standards into a form suitable to be legislated in all State jurisdictions. All participants in the livestock transport industry will need to develop enhanced planning and documentation and quality assurance systems to ensure that new standards are consistently adhered to.

The implementation of these new standards will make a significant contribution to protecting the welfare of Australian livestock during land transport and providing evidence of that protection to all those concerned about this issue.

KEY WORDS

Transport, standards, guidelines.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Paper reviewed by: Tony Higgs

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iii ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) and MLA

iv ABS and Global Trade Atlas, Global Trade Information Services

v ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics)


My 2020 Summit Experience
Mary Nenke, Producer, Kukurin

"Kevin Rudd had the biggest idea of all - to invite 1000 Australians to fill the halls of Parliament House and share their big ideas. For me personally, it was a privilege to be amongst so many fabulous people who were prepared to give their time and energy to share their ideas and passion for an equitable, sustainable future. It was also challenging because I knew that I was the only person from a fishing/aquaculture background participating in the Rural Industries and Rural Communities stream.

Prior to the event we were asked to provide our big idea, which we then shared within a small group on Saturday. I spent time pondering and talked to others about what could make the biggest difference to all who live in RRR Australia and this is what I presented.

"Satellite education centres with high tech, high-speed communications. Teaching would be interactive, innovative, exciting and of the highest quality."

(Explanation)

"Education levels in regional Australia are below those of urban Australia. Improving education has the potential to improve socio economics, health, well-being, diet, alcohol dependence and self-esteem. Current shortages of teachers impacts highest on regional education. Sending students to cities and regional centres for quality education disrupts families, depletes communities of whole generations and adds unnecessary financial burden. With 'world leading' education centres as the hub of towns and the highest quality teachers zoomed in on line, communities will be empowered and enabled to seize opportunities."

I was very pleased when this idea was selected and modified by our Saturday breakout group to:

'World leading Satellite, interactive, education centres of excellence where teachers will be zoomed into communities. These high tech centres would be the hubs of communities empowering the people to improve agriculture and fisheries, grow businesses, tourism and social capital.'

I was excited when the Prime Minister joined our 100 delegates in the late afternoon and I was asked to present our big idea. I was even more excited when the PM responded positively saying:

'I think we maybe on the cusp of something really good.' E education may actually hold something for us. I have been to Telstra recently and seen some of the stuff they can now do with huge broadband capacity in terms of real interactive time and quality over the screen in a way, which is pedagogically useful. I think we are way off in terms of cost of delivery of this but I think the technology is quite exciting in being the ultimate over comer of distance.' "Rural and regional Australia maybe, just maybe, we're on the cusp of doing something really good in terms of E education and E medicine that don't get the same shake of the sauce bottle..."

Where to from the Summit? There is on going communication between members of the stream and a determination that RRR Australia has equity in 2020. Solving the harmonization of road and rail problems that began in 1901 was presented as the priority of the group together with assessing the future of the north for sustainable agriculture. I personally will be very disappointed if this is all that is achieved. On Sunday of the 4 breakout groups, approximately 40% chose 1 workshop, that pertaining to community, demonstrating the enormous concern and determination to make RRR Australia a better place to live. I urge everyone to accept the invitation of the government and have your say. If we are to have a thriving RRR Australia we need to present logical arguments and 'Big Ideas' for equal opportunity."