



Photo: The Livestock Collective



Australia's changing live sheep export trade

There have been dramatic improvements in the performance of Australia's live sheep export trade since 2018. Shipboard delivery rates have hit record highs, animal welfare measures are now collected on every voyage, and community support for the industry is growing.

While mortality rates are not a perfect measure, they are widely considered to reflect animal welfare outcomes. They are also absolute, objective, and reported publicly by the regulator. The average annual mortality rate for 2024 was 0.17% – just under a quarter of the rate a decade earlier.

These results have come about due to a combination of industry initiatives, regulatory reviews and research – some of which are outlined in this document.

Sheep are no longer shipped to the Middle East during the northern hemisphere summer and have significantly more space available the rest of the year. Improved ventilation systems and automated environmental monitoring have improved air quality and comfort for the animals on board. There have also been changes to management practices in pre-export preparation and on the ships carrying sheep overseas, further improving welfare.

To help the industry move beyond mortality as a measure of performance, a range of animal welfare indicators are now reported daily to the regulator. These are demonstrating that most livestock are coping in their environment and showing normal behaviour patterns.

A digital platform has been developed to collect these observations, and shipboard staff trained to ensure consistent, comparable data is available for analysis. This allows both exporters and the regulator to make informed decisions.

Australians understand that animal welfare is a complex issue and multiple surveys of more than 4,000 people since 2019 have shown growing confidence in the live export industry. In 2024, almost three-quarters of respondents agreed the benefits and costs are either about equal or that the benefits of the trade outweigh the costs.

There has been an increased focus on, and awareness of, live sheep exports since an incident in 2017 which highlighted a lack of transparency in the industry and how it was regulated. The Australian Parliament has since passed legislation which bans the live export of sheep from 1 May 2028.

Welfare outcomes

Australia's live sheep trade has achieved dramatic improvements in mortality rates in recent years. The average rate across all voyages in 2024 was 0.17%, compared to 0.72% in 2014.

While not a perfect measure, mortality is objective, absolute, and easily compared over time. There is also a correlation between the number of mortalities and overall welfare during a voyage.

Not a single voyage in the past seven years has lost more than 1% of the sheep on board – the current threshold for an investigation by the regulator.

Comparisons can be made to other livestock industries by calculating a 'daily' mortality rate. For sheep being exported from Australia in 2024, this was 0.005% – the lowest on record and equivalent to the daily rate on farms.

76%↓

Reduction in mortality rates SINCE 2014

Live exports and the community

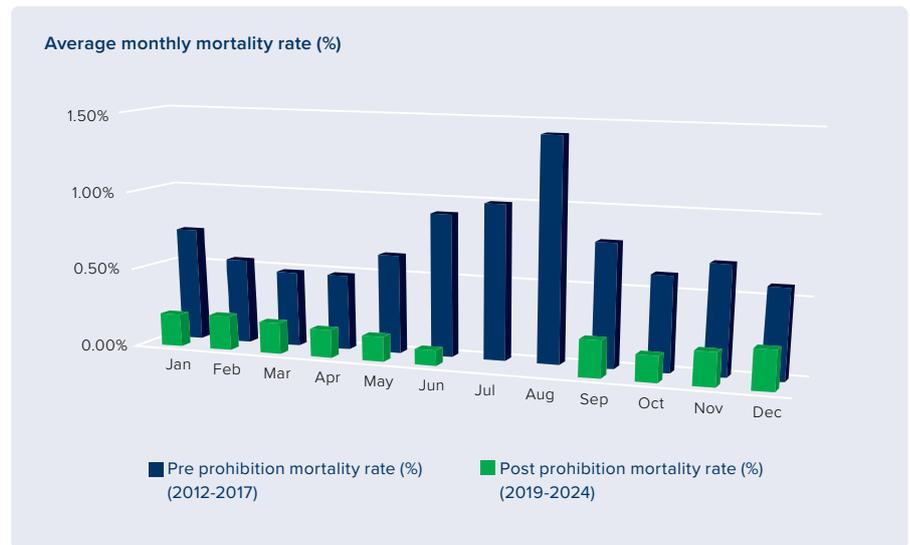
Research into community sentiment regarding live exports has clearly shown there is both support for, and questions about, the industry. In response, significant efforts have been made to open the doors, literally and figuratively, to provide the community with more visibility into its practices.

A series of independent, national surveys has provided the largest, most authoritative and comprehensive dataset on Australian attitudes toward the livestock export industry.

Carried out by CSIRO spin-off Voconiq, the surveys are matched to population data for age, gender and location.

Australians continue to recognise the importance of live exports to the Australian economy, and to families in destination markets through improved nutrition and food security. Animal welfare remains one of the key drivers of trust and acceptance of live exports. Participants acknowledge animal welfare is a complex issue and, overall, have confidence that the industry is taking effective action to ensure the welfare of animals.

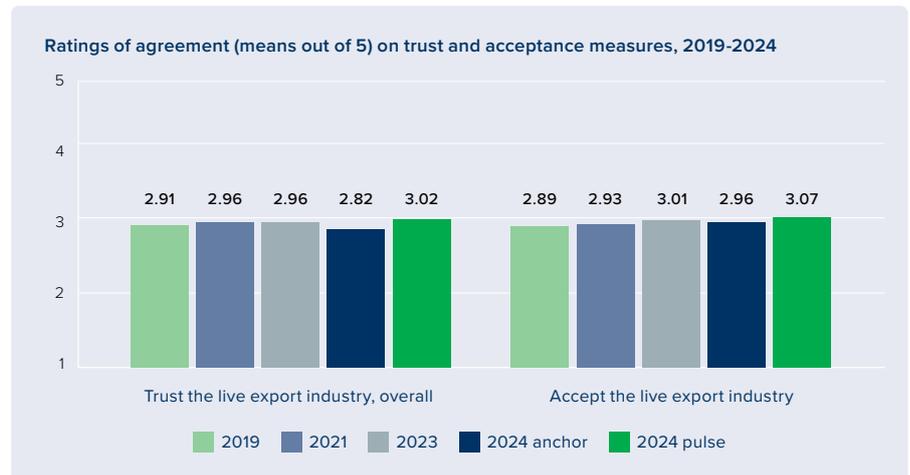
FIGURE 1: There has been a significant decline in shipboard mortalities since major changes to regulation were introduced in 2018. This is evident across every month, proving the prohibition on live sheep exports to the Middle East during the northern hemisphere summer is not solely responsible. *Source: Reports to Parliament*



Did you know?

Mortality data for every sheep shipment is reported daily to the regulator and later made public. The average mortality rate on ships is now comparable to that of sheep on farms in Australia.

FIGURE 2: Since the first survey of community sentiment toward livestock exports in 2019, there's been a positive trend for both trust in, and acceptance of, the industry. Questions comparing live sheep exports and live exports generally have shown no statistically significant differences.



Each anchor survey tests the sentiment of more than 4,000 Australians through almost 100 questions covering aspects of live exports from sourcing the animals to their treatment overseas. Comprehensive reports are published for each survey.



SCAN THE QR CODE TO FIND OUT MORE

What's changed?

There have been fundamental changes to the live sheep export industry in recent years, building on steady progress over the previous decade to improve its performance.

The rules surrounding the trade have been significantly strengthened, with the regulator mandating better ventilation and more space for sheep on the ships, introducing Independent Observers on many voyages, and stopping shipments altogether during the hottest part of the year.

Industry has modified its management practices, selecting sheep more suited to the journey overseas, conducting more checks for pregnancy and general health, and providing on-the-job training for staff in Australia, on ships and in market.

Technology has also improved, with automated loggers on many ships and new systems installed to allow the automatic transfer of data to a central point, making it easier to monitor and analyse conditions.

All these changes, and more, have combined to deliver better animal welfare outcomes for sheep being exported from Australia.

Transparency

The Livestock Collective (TLC) offer tours for farmers, politicians and media to go on board while ships are in port loading sheep, to see the livestock decks and ask questions about the conditions during a voyage.

Information is also shared through social media about how the industry works.

Community sentiment surveys have shown that Australians are most concerned about what happens on livestock export ships – partly because they don't know what goes on there. A 'virtual tour' includes 360° photos and videos of the livestock pens and other parts of the ship so people can look around at their leisure.



An animated video has been developed to help Australians understand how the industry works, why it is important to communities overseas, and the strict regulations which govern it.



Photo: The Livestock Collective

Regulation

Australia is the only country exporting livestock that has stringent regulations covering every aspect of the supply chain, which has resulted in vast improvements to the industry over time.

The Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock (ASEL) set out the requirements for pre-export preparation and the voyages themselves. The Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS) comes into effect as soon as animals destined for slaughter step off a ship or plane in international markets.

Several major reviews of ASEL have occurred since 2018, with a commitment by the regulator to conduct regular updates to ensure the standards remain fit for purpose and reflect the latest science and best practice.

As ESCAS was rolled out in destination markets in 2011-12, industry provided training in animal husbandry and handling to ensure facilities met the standards expected of them. This support has continued and expanded, with exporter staff and consultants regularly providing advice on everything from building layout and equipment, to the development of formal qualifications recognising the skills of feedlot and abattoir workers.

Did you know?

Sheep now have up to 38% more space on live export ships than in 2017.

Did you know?

Exporters are now "leaving the socks on" sheep (not shearing below the knees) to prevent nicks on their lower legs which may be at risk of getting infected.

Did you know?

Animal welfare related projects are a priority for the industry-funded research program.



Photo: The Livestock Collective

Research and innovation

Animal welfare is at the forefront of the industry's thinking, and a priority for the research and development program funded by livestock exporters and farmers.

Significant, long term investment led to the development of meaningful and comprehensive indicators to monitor animal welfare outcomes, which complement mortality as a measure of industry performance.

Since 2020, these indicators have been collected on a daily basis on livestock export ships, forming part of the regulatory reporting requirements for the industry. They cover the environment (eg temperature and sea swell); management (eg access to feed and water); and the sheep themselves (eg demeanour, injuries and illnesses).

A new project is taking the research to the next level. The aim is to develop a system which takes into account the information generated by the individual indicators, and works out how they interact and combine, to give an overall picture of the welfare of groups of animals on ships.

Training also ensures shipboard personnel are collecting animal welfare data in a systematic and standardised way which allows greater opportunities for analysis and helps data-driven decision-making by both exporters and the regulator.

Meanwhile, another long-term university-led project has examined factors such as how sheep use space at different stocking densities (the number of sheep per pen), how diet influences ammonia production, and what happens to the pad under their feet at different temperatures.

Value of the trade

An economic study was conducted in 2023 to provide key facts regarding the economic contribution of the live sheep trade nationally, and to Western Australia.

The key findings include:

- The trade is worth \$a143 million a year*
- It accounts for 17% of Western Australia's sheep turn off*

If the trade were to cease, the value of Merino wethers (male sheep) would drop by:

- 19% or \$21.84 per head
- 33% or \$37.40 per head during a period of high turn off.

Countries are more likely to import live sheep from other countries than directly replace Australian sheep with processed sheepmeat.

* Based on a five year average, 2017-18 to 2021-22



Photo: The Livestock Collective

Destination markets

Live sheep exports to the Middle East in significant numbers can be traced back to the 1940s and the trade has resulted in substantial investment by both Australia and our trading partners. In recent years, Kuwait, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Oman accounted for almost 90% of Australia's live sheep exports.

Our Middle Eastern trading partners have been ranked as 'highly dependent' on food imports by the World Bank, as a dimension of food security. Australia is a key source of food, with live sheep just one of many agricultural products traded into the region.

Across the 15 countries making up the Middle East, around 50% of sheepmeat imports come in the form of live animals, including trade within the region. Australia is among the top three suppliers of sheep for our main markets.

There is still a strong cultural preference for live sheep in the Middle East, as they are seen as symbols of hospitality, generosity and kindness. During religious festivals and special occasions such as weddings and the birth of a child, it is common to share part of the animal with the poor, as well as with family and friends.



Photo: The Livestock Collective

Did you know?

Every ship carrying sheep has an Australian Government Accredited Veterinarian and a LiveCorp Accredited Stockperson on board, as well as crew members dedicated to caring for the sheep.