

Australia - "How can you trust these people that are representing you?" says Beef packer

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"How can you trust these people that are representing you?" said rebel beef processor J.R. McDonald. "They're going to destroy you. And as I say, they all have to be wiped out."

That pretty much summed up a heated anti-establishment meeting in Armidale, NSW, at the weekend, where several hundred beef producers supported proposals to take some extraordinary moves against the current beef industry bodies.

Rallying behind the lead suggested by Mr McDonald and his family, under the banner of his Inverell processing plant, Bindaree Beef, the meeting voted strongly in favour of a Federal review of levy supported bodies Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), the Red Meat Advisory Council (RMAC) and the Australian Meat Processors Council (AMPC).

They also voted in favour of beef levies and AQIS and NLIS charges being suspended while the review was conducted, and for a second review, this time of government costs.

In an unusual move, the resolutions were presented and voted on without opportunity for debate.

They will now be presented to Federal Agriculture Minister, Tony Burke.

The meeting on the University of New England campus attracted between 700-800 people, including a big contingent from Queensland. Bindaree reported that some had come from Tasmania, and there was support from WA.

A small proportion of the audience was in strong disagreement with the sentiment of the meeting. However, with any dissenting opinions attracting heckling from the crowd and the meeting's MC, Alan Jones, most kept quiet and let MLA president and chairman, Don Heatley and David Palmer, take the heat.

Mr Palmer later said that that MLA would be considering how it addressed the issues raised in the meeting, particularly how it communicated with disaffected producers; but he also said that the forum's format meant that producers had not heard a balanced view of the issues.

"The beef industry generates \$1 billion worth of economic activity every month, it's a very significant export earner for the Australian economy, and it deserves better than what it saw on Saturday," he said.

Along with levies, the meeting ranged across a broad range of issues, from "truth in labelling legislation" to imports of BSE beef.

Several producers attacked MLA as being elitist, arguing that its voting system favoured a few big operators and locked out the views of smaller operators.

Most producers at the forum pinned these problems, and their own financial hurt, on a failure of beef industry leadership.

A Pilliga producer told the forum that the average price he got for his cattle last year was \$1.68 per kilogram, while the "true cost of production" was \$2.68/kg.

"I'd like to ask the MLA, what future for us if this continues because obviously that is unsustainable," he said to applause.

"Somewhere along the line, you guys have to stop taking the money off us and we have to make a profit."

David Palmer later commented that benchmarking work showed some producers in southern Australia (which includes northern NSW) had taken their production costs down to 96-98 cents a kilogram—"and they are making money".

"We need to have a more informed and constructive dialogue ... how do we engage with that chap to discuss ways in which he might be able to reduce those costs, and increase productivity?"

The Cattle Council of Australia (CCA) came under heavy fire, from among others Senator Bill Heffernan, for not preventing the import of beef from BSE-affected countries.

Arcadia Valley, Qld, cattle producer and CCA councillor Justin McDonald told Rural Press that if beef producers had problems with the way the industry was being run, they could address them—by being democratically elected to the CCA via their State farming bodies.

Source: farmonline.com.au