

Agriculture in Australia

Our role

As Australia's largest and most trusted animal welfare organisation, the RSPCA is committed to improving and promoting better welfare for farm animals throughout their lifetime.

The RSPCA firmly grounds its policies, communications and activities on the most current animal welfare science. This science-based approach forms the foundation for our role in Australian agriculture.

By working and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders in the livestock sector, supporting research and development, and connecting with individual producers, including through the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme, the RSPCA aims to improve animal welfare for large numbers of animals.

Good animal welfare

Animal welfare can be assessed using three science-based frameworks. For farm animals to have a good life, they must be healthy (biological functioning framework), they must be comfortable and content (affective state framework), and they must be able to express normal behaviour (natural living framework). Thus, good animal welfare means providing animals with all the elements required to ensure their health, physiological fitness, and ability to carry out natural behaviours so that they may experience a sense of positive individual wellbeing.



A science-based approach

The RSPCA firmly grounds policies, positions and information on the most current animal welfare science.

While many factors influence society's decisions about acceptable animal use, science provides a means to understand our impact on animals.

Our science-based approach, combined with the knowledge and expertise gained through engaging with livestock industries and governments, ensures the RSPCA is thorough, accurate and well informed in our approach to improving the welfare of farm animals.

The RSPCA's knowledge and expertise further strengthens our role as a key information and education resource for members of the public who want to know more about farming and farm animal welfare.



The RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme

Established in 1996, the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme provides assurance by working with farmers and companies to improve the welfare of Australia's farm animals and help make products from higher welfare farming systems accessible. The RSPCA Approved logo means consumers can feel confident that the product has come from a farm that achieves a high standard of animal welfare.

The RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme is a not-for-profit program, operated and managed by RSPCA Australia.

To participate in the Scheme, eligible farms are assessed against the RSPCA's detailed animal welfare standards. These standards are publicly available, based on animal welfare science, RSPCA policy and leading farm practices. They set a high level for animal welfare by providing an environment that encourages animals to express natural behaviours, while still being commercially viable. RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards are available for meat chickens, layer hens, turkeys, pigs, dairy veal calves and farmed Atlantic salmon. Through the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme, the RSPCA is improving animal welfare for hundreds of millions of farm animals, today.

Regular on-farm assessments are a critical aspect of the Scheme. RSPCA Approved farms are inspected by an RSPCA Assessor two to four times a year to check compliance against the RSPCA's standards.

To find out more about the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme, including the species-specific standards and what brands are RSPCA Approved, visit rspcaapproved.org.au.

Working with the livestock sector

Throughout its long history, the RSPCA has proven its commitment to working with the livestock sector to achieve improvements in farm animal welfare. The RSPCA is not opposed to the farming of animals for food and fibre. Our objective is to ensure animals in agriculture are treated humanely from birth to slaughter.

We recognise the need to balance animal welfare with the commercial realities of farming to ensure a viable livestock sector where farmers have the resources to properly care for their animals. The RSPCA believes that good animal welfare and the needs of individual animals can be met, while at the same time providing the community with food and fibre and having a productive and profitable livestock sector.

This pragmatic approach to improving animal welfare sees RSPCA Australia engaging with organisations such as:

- Australian Chicken Meat Federation
- Australian Dairy Farmers
- Australian Eggs Limited
- Australian Livestock and Rural Transporters Association
- Australian Livestock Exporters' Council
- Australian Lot Feeders' Association
- Australian Meat Industry Council
- Australian Pork Limited
- Australian Trucking Association
- Australian Wool Innovation
- Cattle Council of Australia
- Dairy Australia
- Meat & Livestock Australia
- National Farmers' Federation
- Sheep Producers Australia
- Tasmanian Salmonid Growers Association
- WoolProducers Australia

RSPCA Australia also works with many other groups to further the welfare of farm animals including the federal government, state/territory governments, financial institutions, farming organisations, countless individual farmers and livestock enterprises, research and development corporations, and universities.

Discussing current and potential animal welfare issues in a collaborative manner provides clarity to the livestock sector about what the RSPCA sees as priority areas for improvement and directions for prospective research thereby achieving significant and widespread improvements for large numbers of animals.

Animal welfare legislation

State and territory animal welfare legislation places certain responsibilities on those in charge of an animal's welfare.

Animal cruelty inspectors may be employed by the state/territory RSPCAs (or by other animal welfare organisations, or by the state/territory government) to enforce animal welfare legislation on behalf of the state/territory government. Where the RSPCA Inspectorate has this responsibility they must act within this framework of animal welfare legislation.

Separately to the Inspectorate role, the RSPCA works to improve legislation and promote uptake of husbandry and management practices that prioritise animal welfare. This includes, for example, contribution to the development and review of legally enforceable minimum standards, through submissions into inquiries and other government processes, and through many other activities that aim to raise community awareness about farm animal welfare issues.



Research and development

Thorough, accurate and current knowledge is essential to making sound animal welfare improvements. RSPCA Australia is invited to contribute animal welfare expertise to a diverse range of agricultural research, development and extension (RD&E) programs.

The RSPCA believes that RD&E programs should reflect an awareness of emerging issues and responsiveness to growing consumer expectations in relation to farm animal welfare. This is particularly important in the development and review of national standards where science-based evidence should underpin regulation that aims to improve animal welfare. The RSPCA sees that an essential aspect of industry and government-funded research is peer review and publication of research results. Only then can the RSPCA actively promote the adoption of technologies and practices that will make a difference to the welfare of farm animals.



Animal welfare and sustainability

With its close links to each of the three sustainability pillars - people, planet, and profit - farm animal welfare is very much a part of the sustainability of Australian agriculture. RSPCA Australia contributes to the development of sustainability frameworks across a range of livestock sectors. We monitor consumer trends and expectations regarding farming and farm animal welfare. By identifying, understanding and responding appropriately to consumer expectations, the livestock sectors can be successful in driving sustainable development. With more and more investors seeking responsible investment strategies and avoiding sources of risk, committing to good animal welfare across the supply chain simply makes good business sense.

Practical tools, practical outcomes

The RSPCA contributes to the development of practical tools such as best practice husbandry and management guides, on-farm and supply chain protocols and animal welfare standards. Through this collaborative approach, the RSPCA improves animal welfare outcomes for farm animals on a large scale. Examples include:

- Minimum standards for farming cattle, pigs, poultry, sheep
- Minimum standards for transporting farm animals
- Minimum standards for handling farm animals at saleyards
- Minimum standards for farm animals at slaughter
- Farm animal fitness for transport
- Farm animal fitness for slaughter
- Best practice husbandry procedures
- Animal welfare, corporate social responsibility and sustainability frameworks
- Humane pest animal control



Continuous improvement

Promoting higher welfare husbandry and management practices is one way by which the RSPCA works towards achieving continuous improvement in farm animal welfare, for example:

Stockpersonship – encourage the development of a positive culture that supports the humane treatment of farm animals where stockpersons have the knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour necessary to handle and interact with animals in an appropriate, caring manner.

Breeding – encourage the breeding of farm animals for positive welfare traits such as robustness and longevity, polled cattle, or flystrike resistant sheep and select against traits which cause or predispose animals to pain and discomfort.

Housing – support farming systems where animals are provided with freedom of movement and the ability to satisfy their behavioural, social, and physiological preferences and needs. The RSPCA opposes extreme confinement, where animals are tethered or housed in cages, stalls or crates.

Painful husbandry procedures – support research and uptake of non-invasive alternatives to painful husbandry procedures, such as beak trimming, castration, disbudding, dehorning, mulesing, spaying, and tail docking. When necessary, advocate for husbandry procedures to be carried out at an early age, by an accredited operator, and using pre- and post-procedure pain relief.

Drought preparedness – encourage uptake of principles for managing animals during drought that focus on planning and preparing for extended dry periods and provide practical strategies to protect farm animal welfare and avoid suffering.

Euthanasia – promote the humane and immediate euthanasia of farm animals that are suffering and that will not recover. We promote the use of an appropriate firearm or captive bolt device to ensure the animal is killed instantly.

Transport – promote mustering, handling and transport practices that do not cause injury, suffering or distress, and focus on the shared responsibility between the farm owner, transport driver and the final receiver, including ensuring that the animal is fit for the intended journey. Because of the risks to animal welfare, RSPCA Australia actively advocates for the phase out of live animal exports to be replaced with meat exports.

Saleyards – where direct consignment of farm animals is not possible, advocate for animal handling and management that minimises stress and helps improve the welfare of animals at saleyards. This includes provision of shade for all animals and sufficient space to move around freely, access to water and the ability to lie down and get up unhindered.

Slaughter – advocate for the humane slaughter of farm animals where the animal is either killed instantly or stunned (rendered insensible) until death ensues, without pain, suffering or distress. Animals must also be held in appropriate facilities that ensure their welfare and handled humanely prior to slaughter.

Transparency – encourage openness of farm operations, participation in independent audit schemes that improve animal welfare and support the provision of accurate information and labelling to consumers.





Our history

The RSPCA's history in Australia dates back to 1871, when the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals met in Victoria to discuss the ill-treatment of working horses. Similar groups were subsequently established in all states and territories of Australia and progressively were granted the Royal Warrant becoming known as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, or RSPCA. By 1980, it was clear that the RSPCA in Australia needed a national organisation to speak with one voice on policy matters, and to offer advice to the federal government on national animal welfare issues. In May 1980, the eight RSPCA Societies agreed unanimously to form a national Society. The new organisation was named RSPCA Australia. While RSPCAs and SPCAs across Australia and the world share similar goals, they all operate independently.

The RSPCA logo, featuring the word 'RSPCA' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, followed by a white paw print icon. The background of the entire page is a blurred photograph of many yellow chicks in a farm setting.

RSPCA

Want to know more about the RSPCA
and our work with the livestock sector?

RSPCA Australia
PO Box 265
Deakin West ACT 2600

Tel 02 6282 8300
Email rspca@rspca.org.au
Web www.rspca.org.au

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