

Opinion

The WEEKLY TIMES

Beef over dairy calf lifespan

IT'S something new that's for sure.

A plan by the Victorian Farmers Federation Livestock Group to change the way the dairy sector rears unwanted male calves seemed almost too "bizarre" to be true at first.

That's putting it politely if you're a dairy farmer that believes nothing is broken and nothing needs fixing.

Making calves live beyond five days, as per the current regulation, is something you'd expect to be raised by welfare groups, activists, or maybe, at a stretch, an out-of-touch government. But certainly not from beef farmers.

The idea is the stuff of nightmares for many dairy farmers who fear they cannot afford to maintain calves for the beef trade and at the same time produce milk.

Besides, what business is it of a group of cattle farmers — experiencing record prices for their commodity — to tell dairy farmers — experiencing record low prices for theirs — how they should rear their animals?

Don't farmers face enough bureaucratic red tape and pressure from welfare groups already, without turning on each other?

No doubt VFF Livestock Group president Leonard Vallance has considered this.

He is adamant industry needs a robust review of the cattle supply chain, and with that comes the bobby calf trade. Mr Vallance wants to shine a light on the issue, and believes extending the life of male calves can deliver good outcomes for farmers.

And no matter how you try to sell it, footage of a days-old calf being sent to slaughter doesn't wash well with consumers, or welfare groups.

Of course, the fear is what such a move could do to those calves not captured on film.

A lack of doctors is affecting the health of non-metropolitan communities

Unhealthy shortage



Fresh thinking is needed when it comes to placing doctors in rural areas, writes **ANTHONY SCOTT**

AUSTRALIA has more doctors per head of population than most OECD countries. But they are not necessarily in the locations they are needed most.

While there is an oversupply of doctors, our research shows that two-thirds of these graduates want to stay in cities, no matter how much you pay them.

Having too many doctors in metropolitan areas is a waste of valuable resources and can lead to over-diagnosis and over-treatment, so patients benefit less and less the more doctors there are.

In contrast, not having enough doctors in rural areas means less treatment and poorer health outcomes for people in those communities.

Doctors from overseas may have filled the gap in rural areas, but these



Sharp focus: A federal review will look at how to get more doctors into rural areas.

doctors are not happy as they are required to go to country locations for up to 10 years, or are on short-term temporary visas and would much rather be in cities.

The Federal Government has already indicated it wants to cut the number of doctors immigrating to Australia and has provided incentives to rural workforce agencies, who assist with recruitment into these areas, to focus more on hiring Australian graduates.

The problem is that if the Government cuts immigration, then it will be

extremely difficult and costly to fill the gap in the supply of rural doctors.

The Government already has a range of funding and incentive schemes, but it is likely they pay too little and are not carefully targeted.

Medical schools have been set targets for recruiting students from rural backgrounds, and there is now a range of rural clinical and medical schools in non-metropolitan areas.

These schemes have all existed for many years, but the problem of a rural doctors' shortage has yet to be resolved. There is a Government review

under way of the distribution of medical training places across Australia, so more policies to attract doctors to work in rural areas are likely to be announced.

A doctor's attachment to rural areas is clearly associated with working there. Facilitating these connections should be the focus of Government policy. This includes recruiting more medical students from rural backgrounds because (as our research has shown) these students are 2½ times more likely to end up going back to rural communities.

Also, doctors have long periods of postgraduate training before they qualify as a GP or specialist, and more of this training needs to take place in rural areas.

Meanwhile, strengthening rural connections also needs to be supported by more carefully targeted financial incentives, locum support for time off, professional development, and advanced skills training.

Quenching the thirst for doctors in rural areas needs some creative solutions and a significant change in policy that focuses on producing and using evidence about what works to improve the health of rural communities.

• **Professor Anthony Scott leads the Health Economics Research Program at The University of Melbourne**

Billions spent on roads, rail will benefit us all

CONNECTIVITY in all its forms is critical to the future growth and prosperity of regional Victoria.

Keeping our communities connected with better roads, rail services, airports and telecommunication links provides more opportunities for people to live and work outside of the increasingly congested greater Melbourne area.

All levels of government need to work in partnership with industry and the community to prioritise infrastructure investment decisions, which address community needs now and into the future. We need to be focused on building the infrastructure our kids and grandkids will thank us for.



Connectivity, including road, rail, air and communications, is crucial for regional Victoria, writes **DARREN CHESTER**

I recently announced a National Freight and Supply Chain Strategy, which will help to inform some of those decisions and provide an investment blueprint for the future. Getting our products to market in a cost-effective and timely manner will help us to capitalise on free trade agreements and deliver more jobs in regional areas.

Projects such as the Murray Basin Rail Project are already under way and will make a real difference in the

northwest of the state. In the not-too-distant future, the Melbourne-Brisbane Inland Rail line will allow for more freight to be taken off the roads and transported by rail along the eastern seaboard more efficiently.

Connecting our communities is even more important. Last year the Federal Government was able to negotiate a \$3 billion infrastructure deal in partnership with the Victorian Government to help get our state moving again. Those projects are roll-

ing out across Victoria, creating safer roads and better transport links.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull wants the Commonwealth to be an active partner in passenger rail projects and I have been meeting with the Victorian Government about possible projects.

Travelling by rail for work, medical appointments, or leisure needs to be improved in regional Victoria with a more reliable network and greater frequency of services. I am confident the Federal Government can make a real difference for regional Victorians.

• **Darren Chester is the Federal Minister for Infrastructure and Transport**

Crop damage?

Have you applied a pre-emergent herbicide to the following crops?

- ONIONS
- GARLIC
- SPRING ONIONS
- CELERY
- LEEKS
- ESCHALLOTS
- PARSNIPS
- CARROTS
- BEETROOT
- BRASSICAS
- POTATOES

If you believe you have suffered crop damage, you may be entitled to compensation for any loss you have suffered.

Contact our expert Agriculture Lawyers at:



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