

Our beef with 'Big Meat': The power perpetuating Australia's live export trade is at play elsewhere

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Australia was once the world's [largest exporter](#) of live animals. But exports have [declined in recent years](#).

In May, the federal government [announced](#) live [export](#) of sheep by sea would end on May 1, 2028, in response to animal welfare concerns. This does not extend to other livestock animals or modes of transport.

Despite 30 years of public scrutiny, the [suffering](#) of [livestock at sea](#) continues. In our [new research](#), we wanted to understand how the meat industry manages to sustain the status quo.

We explored parts of the meat industry in Australia, Brazil and the United States. We found a highly concentrated global industry, with close ties to governments, a lack of regulatory oversight, and protective cultural norms. To address these power imbalances, we propose a different approach to regulation.

Wielding power over nature, animals and people

Industrial production, trade and consumption of meat is [harmful in many ways](#).

Aside from the human health consequences of eating to excess or risking antibiotic resistance, many types of [meat production](#) operations produce substantial greenhouse gases. They also degrade and contaminate natural resources and contribute to biodiversity loss. Some operations also involve the exploitation of workers, or harmful treatment of animals.

But the [true costs of mass production](#) are typically diverted from the producer onto others. In economics, this is called cost-shifting.

How do they get away with it? Large profit-driven corporates in the industrial livestock and meat-processing sector wield significant economic and political influence. This enables many of the negative impacts associated with meat production to continue. It also means our capacity to regulate them is limited.

These issues are not unique to Australia. Our research looked at three [case studies](#) across global meat supply chains:

- soybean production in Brazil, for export to feedlots in China
- live animal export from Australia
- meat processing in the United States.

We found close relationships between governments and industry, strong cultural and social values around meat, a lack of transparency in supply chains, and undue influence on policy-making. All contributed to prioritizing high levels of meat production, despite the harms involved.

Power play in Australia's live export trade

The production and consumption of meat has surged in recent decades. Meat has become a staple in the modern Australian diet and a major export commodity.

Australia's meat production depends on a powerful network of farmers, large-scale multinationals, powerful agribusiness representative groups, and close political and institutional relationships.

This network has successfully justified the practice of live export as essential to the economic and cultural interests of global [food security](#).

Consequently, the live export trade is often portrayed as [a "solution" to global hunger](#), overlooking that many populations already consume meat well in excess of nutritional needs.

The industry also emphasizes live export as [a significant economic contributor](#) and employment provider in rural Australia. These organizations also make policy submissions and conduct their own research advocating for live export as a crucial sales channel for

Australian producers.

Parallels in Brazil and the US

We see similar power dynamics operating overseas.

In Brazil, [substantial financial investment](#) has been devoted to developing soybean production facilities. Most soybeans are grown to feed animals in feedlot production systems.

Close relationships between the [meat industry](#) and Brazilian politicians have enabled the industry's expansion. In one case, a former governor of Mato Grosso—the largest area of the Amazon affected by deforestation for soy production—is also the owner of one of Brazil's [largest soybean producers](#). Such political relationships have also allowed for a softening of Brazil's deforestation regulations.

Similar relationships exist in the US. During the COVID pandemic, meat-processing workers were vulnerable to infection because they work in close proximity. After a brief shutdown, [a US meat industry trade group](#) urged authorities to grant an exemption and reopen meat processing facilities.

This action was framed as "necessary" for economic reasons and to maintain the domestic food supply. That's despite the [labor violations](#) involved in compromising the safety of workers, many of whom were [migrants or refugees](#) who may not have felt empowered to advocate for their rights.

Ways forward

Policies proposed to address food system harms include consumption

taxes, labeling schemes and education campaigns. But these are mostly "adjustments" to the food system, rather than structural changes.

Our research suggests a more holistic and multifaceted approach is needed across the food system—for instance, restricting foreign land ownership in Brazil to prevent further ecological damage in the Amazon. In the US, redistributing agricultural subsidies toward more small-scale, diverse and "[agroecological](#)" farming operations would foster more ethical and environmentally friendly food production. However, such a transition would also necessitate a reduction in the total amount of meat produced and consumed.

Changing cultural attitudes towards meat production may help too. Retailers can mandate ethical standards from their meat suppliers and include animal welfare in sustainability policies. National [dietary guidelines](#) and subsidies could also encourage people to eat more minimally processed plant foods and [less meat](#) for both human and planetary health.

More broadly, more diligent [implementation of competition policy](#) could break up the concentrated power of just a few large meat companies.

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