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Transcript - Norman Hunt and Richard Torbay MLC on beef labelling reforms

KIM HONAN (Compare): Well, does the beef industry need a new labelling system or is it going to further confuse consumers and at additional cost to producers. Currently there are no laws regarding the labelling of beef in the Australian market stopping old beef being sold as premium.

There is now a Bill before State Parliament proposing legislation to tighten up the mark in the hope that consumers will see an increase in product consistency and therefore consumption.

Solicitor, Norman Hunt, and Member for the Northern Tablelands, Richard Torbay, spoke to concerned producers at a forum in Lismore. And our reporter Elyse Morgan was there.

RICHARD TORBAY: Well, I think if you get the basics right, the education or the marketing process is a lot easier. If you bring in these sorts of reforms, as we've seen in other jurisdictions internationally, you've got one set of language, one set of rules across all of the states and territories, making it easier to market.

I can't accept at all the argument that the current mish-mash of different rules, regulations and, I think, processes that are not well understood at all is better than one set of reforms that comes through across states and territories with language that everyone agrees upon. The consumer is better off; they know what they're buying. The producer is able to get a premium price depending on the quality that they put forward. And, of course, the industry looks at more consumption. And we've seen consumption declining so significantly, particularly over the last 25, 30 years.

REPORTER: Norman, you spoke earlier about that strict labelling that's in the US, what are on the meat packets in the US?

NORMAN HUNT: The meat package has either got prime, choice, or select. And so that every - or consumer that walks into the supermarket can go to the shelf and choose one of those grades.

REPORTER: Norman, you just spoke about how simple it could be, like in America, but as one of the beef producers here said, we already have such a complex system of Meat Standards Australia, or MSA, Beef Producers Australia. We have all sorts of different organisations with all sorts of different rules and labels and everything else. How can you break through that? Is there any possibility of us actually just breaking it down into those three simple labels?

NORMAN HUNT: I think there's every possibility. As I indicated to the forum earlier, that following the Red Meat Advisory Council forum in '03/'04, industry has produced a working model which is our starting point for the current system.

REPORTER: Is it going to create more work for beef producers, processors, the whole chain?

NORMAN HUNT: Okay, I think the answer to that is pretty simple; 80 per cent of the beef consumed in Australia now comes from AUS-MEAT accredited abattoirs and all their meat is already assessed and graded by - in accordance to the AUS-MEAT requirements. So there'll be little or no change in the requirements to the abattoir. And the only additional issue that will arise is the auditing of the retailer. And that can either be carried out by the food authority or in the same way that lamb and hogget branding is or alternatively, if industry wants to, AUS-MEAT could take over the auditing function.

REPORTER: Mr Torbay, another concern was that if this does fall over at the federal level, is that the end of it, again for another 25 years?

RICHARD TORBAY: Absolutely not. As I've said to the minister in New South Wales, Minister Macdonald, I am happy to postpone further debate in the parliament, as I've already introduced this legislation, waiting on these negotiations at a federal level because I think nationalising this would be one set of rules right across the country, one set of language, one set of categories.

REPORTER: How long are you going to wait for the Feds to move until you realise it's not going to happen, let's cut our losses, and just introduce it into New South Wales?

RICHARD TORBAY: Basically I've said six months. And if that's not the case I'm going to proceed with the legislation by simply continuing the debate in the parliament. It's there, and I'm not going to back off on it. There's been so much widespread support for this and it's been scuttled before just, as I said, by a few vested interests reasons. This legislation has got incredible support and momentum. That doesn't mean we've got all of the detail right yet. That's what forums like this, that Janelle Saffin has invited me to, are so important. We want to get that feedback.

But I'm keen to progress it and make sure that we get this legislation right. If the Feds won't do it, that would be the best thing together with the states, then New South Wales, from my perspective, I'll be producing - proceeding with this Bill and I'm sure it will get strong support on the floor of the New South Wales Parliament.

KIM HONAN: Speaker of the House and Member for Northern Tablelands Richard Torbay speaking with Elyse Morgan in Lismore.

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Transcript produced by Media Monitors