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BY COLIN BETTLES

Greens push animal bill



Greens' Animal Welfare spokesperson and NSW Senator Lee Rhiannon and Greens' Deputy Leader Adam Bandt address the media on Monday.

THE Australian Greens have moved to gazump the federal Labor government's planned Independent Office of Animal Welfare and make it an election issue.

The Greens are frustrated at the lack of progress on plans to establish the Office and promote greater animal welfare rights, following a resolution passed at the ALP's National Conference in November 2011.

Greens' Deputy Leader Adam Bandt announced he would introduce the new Voice for Animals Bill into the House of Representatives this week as the party continued pushing for a total live exports ban.

Mr Bandt said the Office would be a centre of excellence for animal welfare science and law and work to harmonise and improve animal welfare laws across the country.

He said it would give animals a voice in parliament, independent of the Agriculture Department and Ministry, to reduce animal cruelty.

The Greens say the Office would also monitor and recommend improvements to the new Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS).

A request to the Parliamentary Budget Office from the Greens has estimated the new bureaucracy would cost \$500,000 in 2013/2014.



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Greens' Animal Welfare spokesperson and NSW Senator Lee Rhiannon said the Bill addressed growing community concerns around animal welfare “in all aspects of our farming”.

“More and more people want to ensure the food they eat, the meat that they buy, is being produced ethically - they want to know how it’s produced,” she said.

Senator Rhiannon plans to introduce the Bill into the Senate when it returns next month and says it mirrors the Labor party’s policy and she expects their support.

The Greens also expressed frustration that Labor’s Caucus Live Animal Export Working Group reported on its proposed Office to Federal Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig in February but follow up has been insufficient.

However, bipartisan support appears unlikely, despite the Greens' plans to assume the ALP agenda originally pushed by key architects and government MPs Kelvin Thomson and Melissa Parke who developed the planned Office in response to the Indonesia live exports crisis in June 2011.

Minister Ludwig said Labor had only received the Greens' proposal on Monday and would now consider it, but his party was still working on the details of its proposed office.

“We took the policy to our conference, we developed it in caucus and now government is working through the policy and legal challenges that such a move entails,” he said.

“The Gillard government has made the single biggest reforms to animal welfare of the any Australian government and only a Labor government will continue to improve animal welfare across Australia and abroad.

“Our approach will focus on working with states, territories and industry to deliver better animal welfare outcomes - not the political posturing the Greens' Bill represents.”

Shadow Federal Agriculture Minister John Cobb said the Bill still needed to pass through proper Coalition process.

But he said as there was no consultation with industry and with the prospect of it adding extra red tape and cost to industry, without improving animal welfare, it was “extremely unlikely” the Coalition would support the Bill.

“So far I have spoken with the National Farmers’ Federation, NSW Farmers, Cattle Council and the live exporters and there has been no consultation whatsoever,” he said.

“This is just more red tape designed to make farming more costly, to shut down industry, it is not designed to improve animal welfare.”

The National Farmers’ Federation (NFF) said its members opposed the proposed Office because they believed a “strong, rigorous system of animal welfare” was already in place.

“We strongly support the existing animal welfare structures, which ensure that through the states and territories, Australia’s strict animal welfare laws are upheld domestically, and that overseas, through DAFF and ESCAS, conditions are continuously improved in our trading markets,” an NFF spokesperson said.

“If there are any moves to establish an Office of Animal Welfare, then we would expect to see extensive consultation to ensure our concerns are heard.



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“The simple fact is that a change in structure in how animal welfare is managed in Australia is not going to change the behaviour and attitudes of the people who manage livestock overseas.

“We believe the best solutions will be driven by the sector – solutions like the education and training the livestock export sector is already delivering on the ground in our overseas markets to the people who handle Australian livestock.”

Colourful NSW Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan gatecrashed the Greens' media conference at Parliament House in Canberra on Monday, standing directly behind Senator Rhiannon.

But after the conference Senator Heffernan declined to comment on the Greens' plans saying he wasn't across of the details for the new Office.

“That's why I came here to listen,” he said.

Senator Rhiannon appeared unmoved by Senator Heffernan's presence.

“I suppose I've just been in Senate Estimates with Mr Heffernan interrupting many times,” she said.

“I hope that he respects our press conference and I'm always happy to debate and discuss the issue.”