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EXPORT QUALITY FEARS OVER MEAT INSPECTION PRIVATISATION

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THE Australian government is considering drastic changes to the way red meat destined for export is accredited as safe and free of disease by federal government-employed meat inspectors.

In a bid to reduce the cost of meat inspection to abattoirs and meat-exporting companies that pay for the mandatory service, the government may soon let some of its 250 federal meat inspectors be replaced by independent inspectors supplied by a third-party private service provider.

The move would also cut the number of public servants on the federal Agriculture Department's payroll, loosen regulations on domestic-only meatworks, and fit with Coalition government promises of less red tape for the private sector, smaller government and the divestment of "non-core" government activities.

But farmers and some meat companies — including the nation's biggest meat processor, JBS Australia — fear the change in the name of business flexibility risks damaging the good reputation, safety standards and value of Australia's \$8 billion beef export industry and \$1.6bn lamb trade.

The Australian understands the government is considering allowing companies to replace federal meat inspectors — who check

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every export carcass for bacterial contamination or disease — with “outsourced” accredited inspectors supplied by an independent, unassociated business.

Union officials were told early this month by the Department of Agriculture’s first assistant secretary for food, Greg Read, that a decision “had been taken to move away from government meat inspectors” and to engage “third-party providers across a number of plants”.

But the Agriculture Department has denied that it would outsource government meat-inspection services. It admitted major changes were afoot, but declined to detail its exact plans.

“The Department of Agriculture is committed to ensuring Australia’s export-meat certification system is maintained at the highest standard,” a statement from the department to The Australian said.

“This commitment to ensuring a strong export meat certification system does not propose the use of third-party outsourced meat inspection; what is proposed is giving Australian export meat establishments the flexibility to move between different meat inspection models.”

NSW Farmers livestock president Derek Schoen believes the government must be “very cautious” about any moves to privatise meat-inspection services, either directly or indirectly.

“We have had too many incidents in the past with self-inspection; when the client exporting the beef is basically doing the inspection itself, it’s very hard to maintain quality control,” an alarmed Mr Schoen said.

“It doesn’t seem worth it to save just a little bit of money to do anything that might affect our meat quality, reputation or market access; a hiccup anywhere along that export supply chain has ramifications for the whole industry because once quality is compromised, it takes a long time to get the confidence back.”

Meat companies currently pay the government \$142,119 a year for every federal meat inspector on the abattoir floor. They have been told by the government that this charge would fall to \$130,000 a year for the provision of a non-government meat inspector hired from outside the public service, but with the official approval of the federal government.

Four years ago, when companies were allowed to introduce a twin system of “self-regulation”, using their own inspectors throughout meatworks except for the final carcass health check, Europe and Japan refused to buy “self-inspected” beef products as they did not meet their standards.

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