



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Melbourne Veterinary School

***Ethics versus economics:
Early life killing of surplus
calves & the wicked problem
it presents***

Dr Sarah Bolton

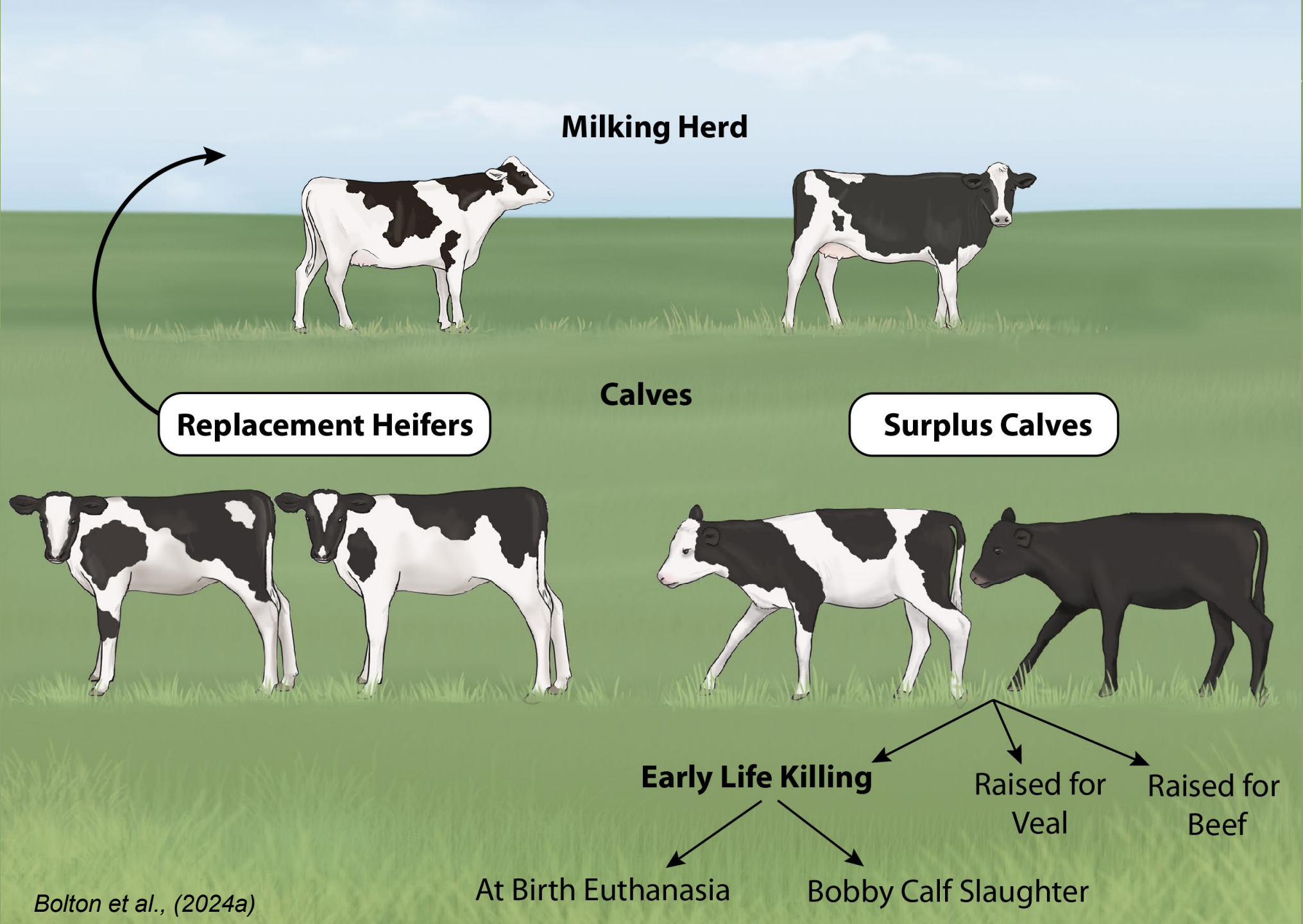
RSPCA Animal Welfare Seminar

February 20th, 2025

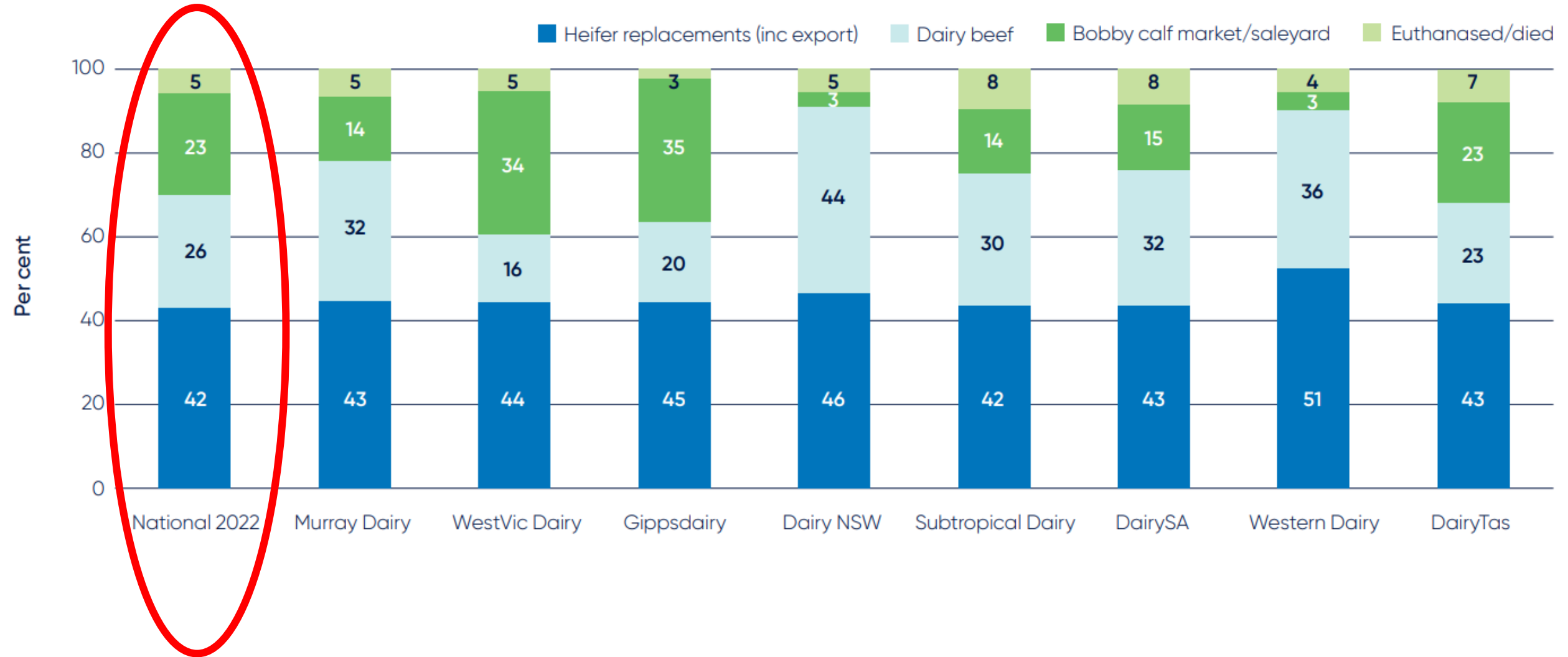
Acknowledgement of country

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which I live and work, the Gunaikurnai, Taungurung, Waywurru, and Jaithmathang people, and pay respects to their elders past and present.

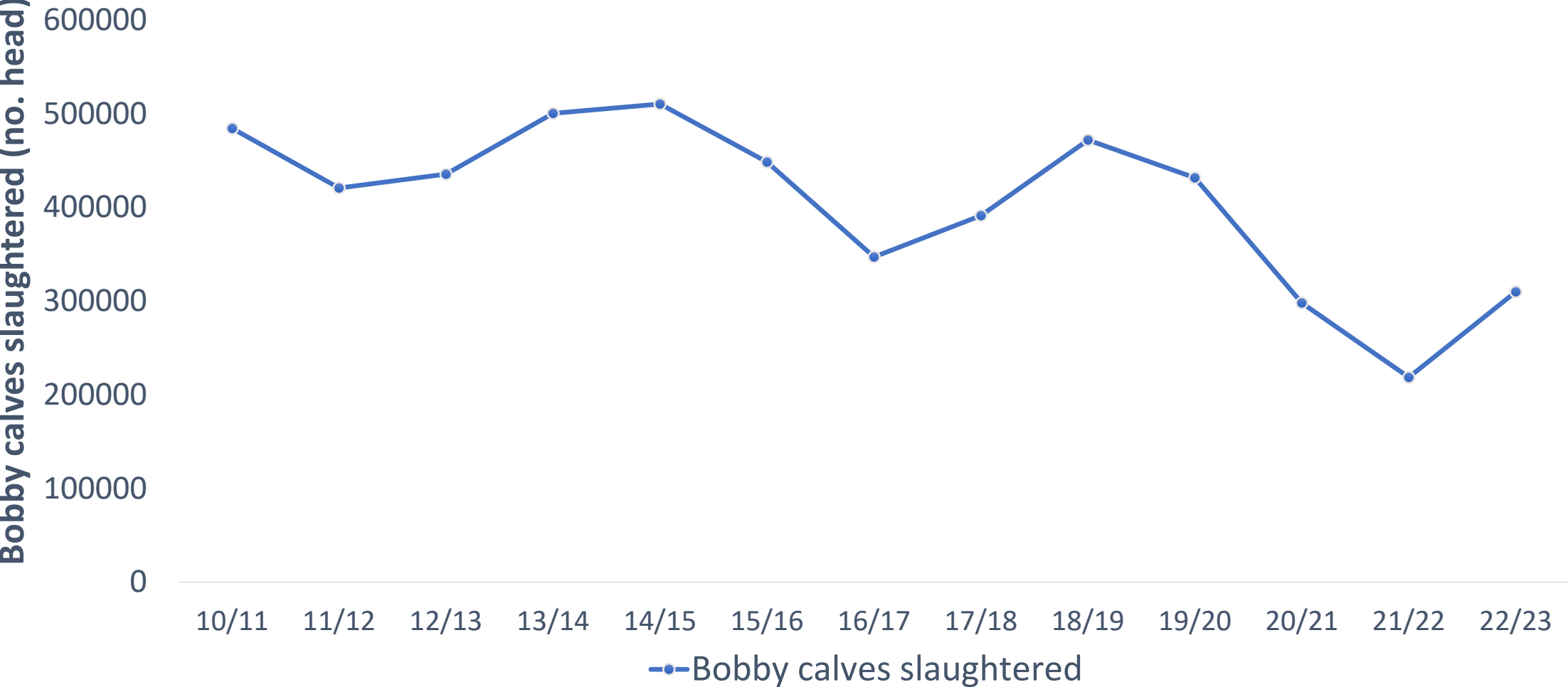
In partaking in today's discussion, we pay homage to the ancient First Nations tradition of story telling and knowledge sharing; in particular, the deep knowledge of, and connection to, land and animals held by First Nations cultures.



Dairy calf market pathways (AUS)

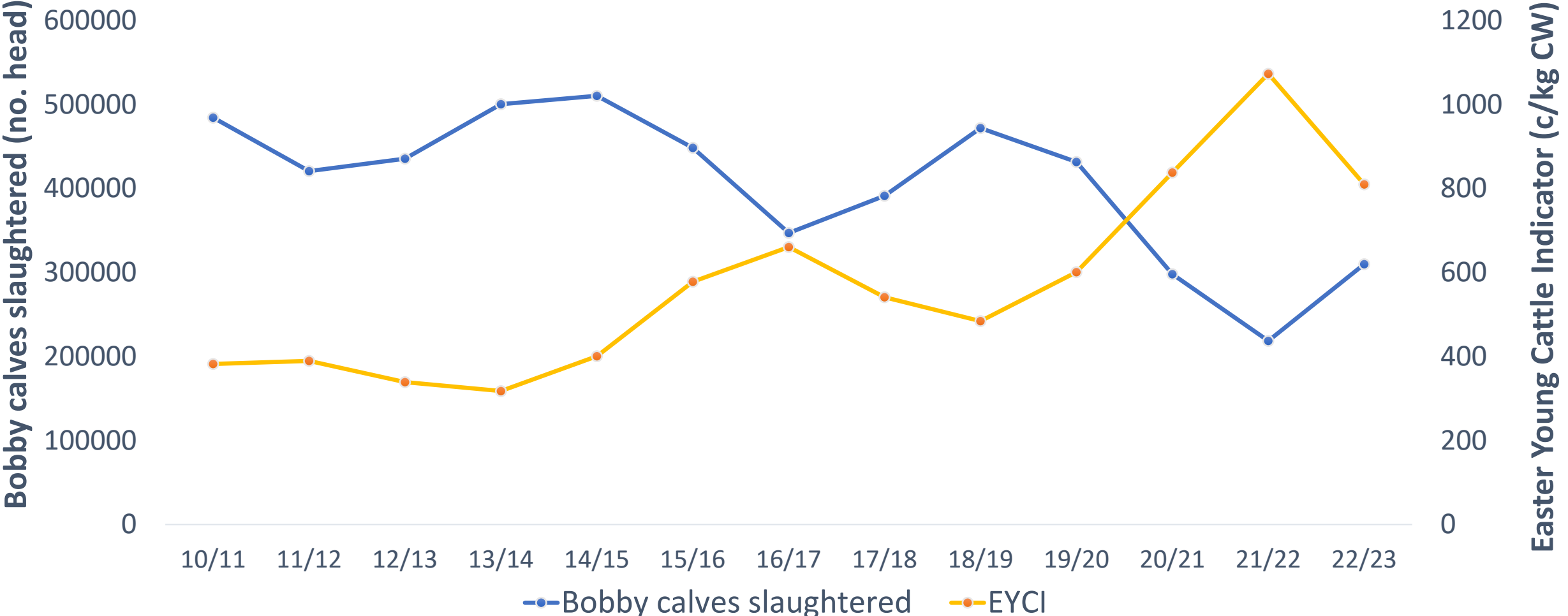


Bobby calf slaughter (AUS)



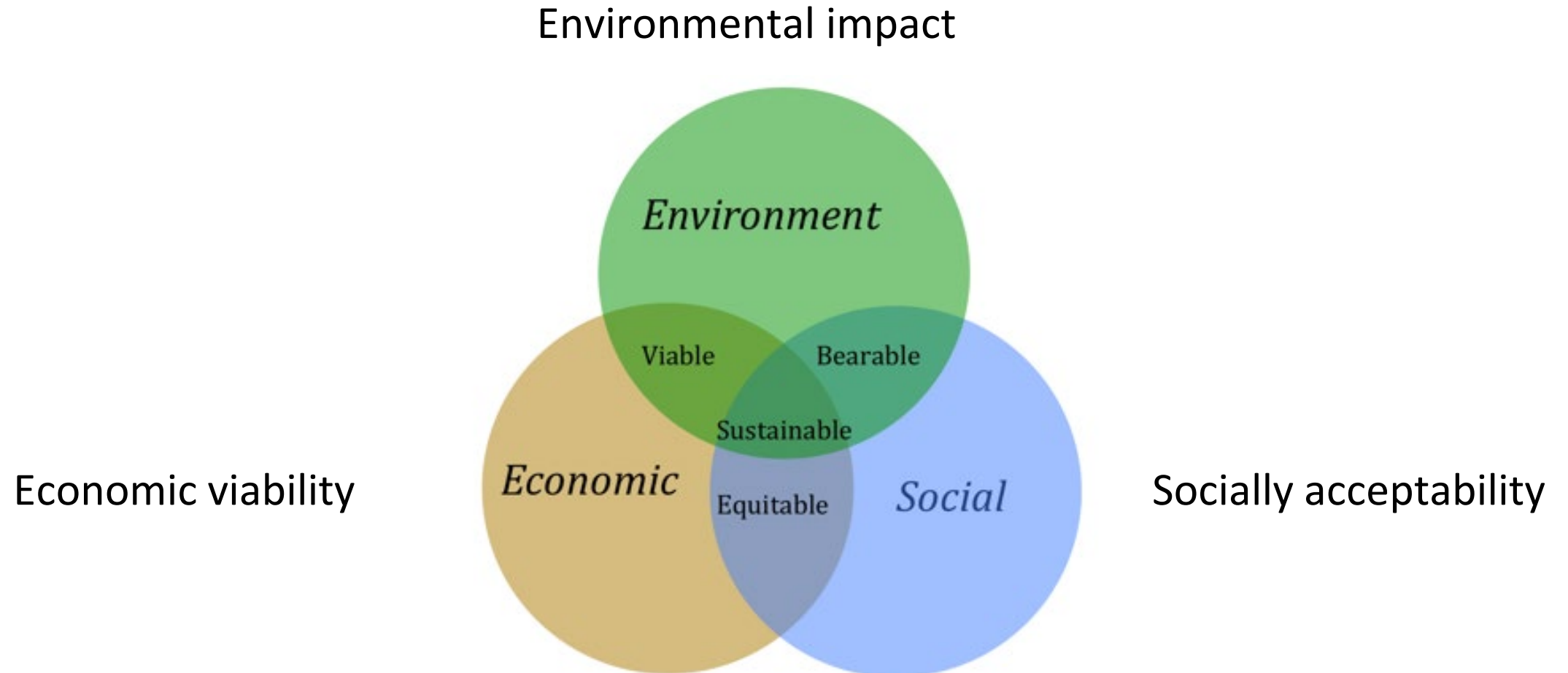
Dairy Australia. Dairy calf market pathways trends 2010-23. (2024).

Bobby calf slaughter vs beef commodity price (AUS)



Dairy Australia. Dairy calf market pathways trends 2010-23. (2024).

Sustainability - what does it mean?



Complex or 'wicked' problems

Many stakeholders

Often with different versions of what the problem is → lack of ownership

Not stable, interconnected

Often multi-causal with evolving driving forces

Involve behaviour change

And/or gaining the commitment of individuals

Socially complex

Social complexity rather than technical complexity is what overwhelms traditional problem solving

Tackling complex or 'wicked' problems



Research that attempts to break the problem down into disciplinary parts is insufficient alone

Tackling complex or 'wicked' problems



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Requires understanding and accounting for the needs of all stakeholders
This includes the public and the animals

Tackling complex or 'wicked' problems



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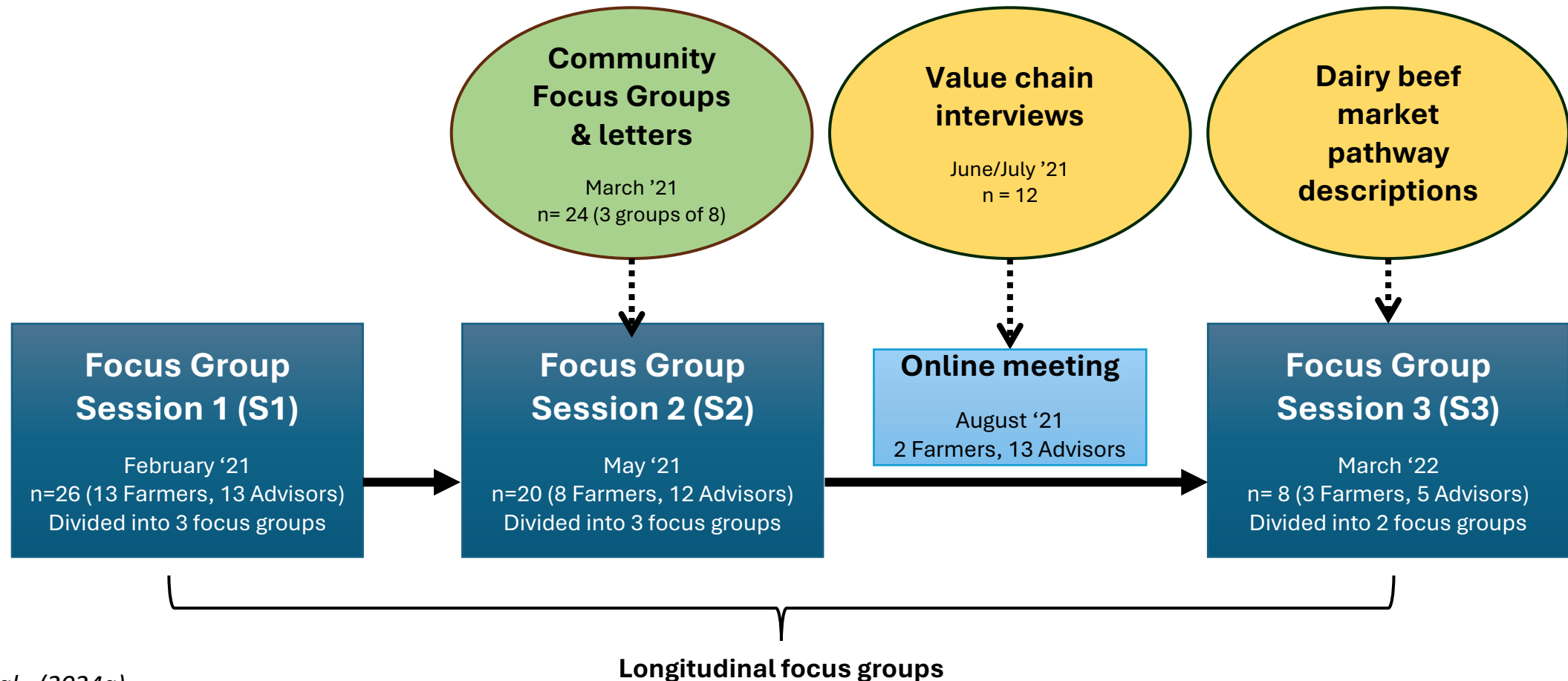
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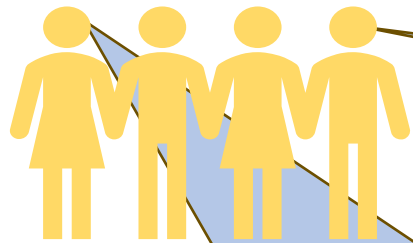
Participatory methodologies: involving different stakeholders in agenda-setting, decision making, or policy forming activities

Deliberative engagement: citizens discuss ideas, engage with the perspectives of others, and develop their viewpoints over the course of discussions

Using a participatory framework to address sustainable surplus calf management



Age of death



Value Chain
Stakeholder Interviews

“It is the same end result; it is just when does [death] become [acceptable]? Is it 7 days, 12 weeks, a year?” (G1, S1)



Farmer Focus Groups

“I increasingly can’t come to terms with the early age euthanasia of calves just because they’re not going to be reared [...] I personally just keep reconsidering that and I just don’t find it acceptable in the long term” (Interview 5)

“[the question is] would it pass the pub test? I think if the bobby calves have been grown out [for beef] and there’s a story behind it [and] it’s not that they’re being euthanased on-farm or just sent straight to slaughter then I think it’s a nice story” (Interview 7)

Age of death

On early life killing: *“I was absolutely horrified about that.”*
(FG2)

“I’m just oblivious in my own little world [...] the male, the little calves. I didn’t realise that they killed them.” (FG3)

“So, we are bothered by the fact that it is a baby calf but not bothered by the fact that we would be killing the cow when it is older?” (FG3)



Community Focus Groups

Killing at birth vs. bobby calf slaughter



“I think it’s easier to make the concept palatable if there is a purpose in the death so a [5 day old] calf going to become a foodstuff is an easier sell than a calf that just goes into a hole in the ground” (Interview 5)

“Some people may have the view that humanely euthanasing on-farm is actually kinder to the calf” (Interview 7)

“I think we’ve actually got it right if we’re going to continue with the belief that an appropriate welfare-friendly, sustainable practice is early destruction of male calves to go into the meat industry and the industry seems comfortable with that. It’s whether we can perpetrate that belief into the wider community” (Interview 5)

Killing at birth vs. bobby calf slaughter



Farmer Focus Groups

“We’ve been getting \$15 for a bobby calf [and] it will cost you \$2.50 for the piece of paper [NVD], \$4.50 for the NLIS tag to put in its ear, \$12.20 to feed the calf for a week and then you’re paying someone \$28.50 to feed it [...] and then you get \$15 for it. It is not worth it.” (G2, S1)

Rearing challenges

"[...] there [are] some shocking farmers that can't rear calves [...] and [those calves] would have been better off being euthanased." (G1, S1)



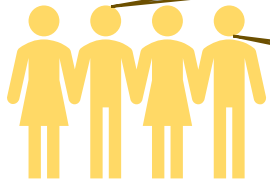
Farmer Focus Groups

"[...] when I decided to rear all our [calves], [...] suddenly I have got more calves than I know what to do with. I haven't got the facilities, I have got sick calves, my vet loves me because I keep going in there every other day getting more drugs and then there is the tears and the heartache of animals I just can't look after because I just haven't got the room to do it. So, nothing gets done. Nothing is reared properly. It is really complicated." (G1, S1)



Rearing challenges

“I think also [...] what’s really important is [...] ensuring that these calves are getting the correct welfare. There’s no point in rearing a calf if it’s going to have terrible welfare” (Interview 7)



Value Chain
Stakeholder Interviews

“Every time when we go through those big spikes in beef prices, everyone goes ‘oh I can buy a calf at 30 kgs for 500 bucks’ and then by the time it comes round to selling the animal it’s only worth \$1,000 in the market because it’s a dairy cross and [they realise] ‘I’ve run that animal for 2½ years for 200 bucks [profit]’. So that’s not what we want to do” (Interview 3)

Cow-calf separation

“I hadn’t honestly ever thought about it, never thought about that aspect of tearing calves away from mothers [...].” (FG2)

“I couldn’t imagine being separated from one of my children in the first 24 hours. [...] even though they are an animal, they are still a mum, and I don’t agree that they would forget because I don’t believe we forget who we are connected with.” (FG1)

“How is it better for [the animals] or is it just [...] better because once they take [the calf] away, the cow is producing more milk, and it makes the dairy more productive?” (FG1)



Community Focus Groups

Cow-calf separation



Value Chain
Stakeholder Interviews

“I think if you’re a [member of the] general public and you see these baby cows being transported, lots of people will see them, baby calves without their mums being taken on this scary journey” (Interview 7)



“It is actually in the calf’s best interest to be removed from the cow within 12 hours so we can [...] make sure [that the calf] gets colostrum and then [separation also] limits the number of bugs that [the calves] are [...] exposed to [...] so we actually need to educate the public about why we do take calves off cows” (G2, S1)

Farmer Focus Groups

Cow-calf separation

“I [know of a] a small business selling ethically produced milk and keeping [calves] on cows. [...] [Their] biggest clientele is people who went away from milk because of those ethical reasons. [...] so it has brought people back to drinking milk. It might be upsetting most of [the] dairy industry but [they have] tapped into a niche market opportunity. [...] Is it just about, rather than fight the beast [...], is the answer we must meet the market demand [...] [and] just stop fighting the beast?”
(G1, S2)



Farmer Focus Groups

Australian public attitudes: Future options for surplus calf management

To produce milk, dairy cows must give birth to a calf approximately once a year. The calves are usually separated from the mother within a day of being born and are fed milk by the farmer. Most female calves born on dairy farms will stay on the farm to produce milk once they are old enough. However, male calves cannot produce milk and not all the female calves are needed for milk production.

To manage this, male calves and surplus female calves are commonly used for meat production. According to recently published figures, about 40% of the calves born on Australian dairy farms are slaughtered for meat within 2 weeks of birth.

N = 1000

Representative with respect to demographic factors
(region, age, gender, urban vs rural)



Pasture + Industry commitment

The [dairy industry has recently committed to discontinuing the practice](#) of slaughtering calves within 2 weeks of birth. As an alternative, farmers rear them until they are about 18 months of age. These animals are [kept in open paddocks and eat grass](#) until they are slaughtered for meat.

Feedlot + Industry Commitment

The [dairy industry has recently committed to discontinuing the practice](#) of slaughtering calves within 2 weeks of birth. As an alternative, farmers rear them until they are about 18 months of age. These animals are [kept in pens with no access to grass and eat grain and hay](#) before being slaughtered for meat.

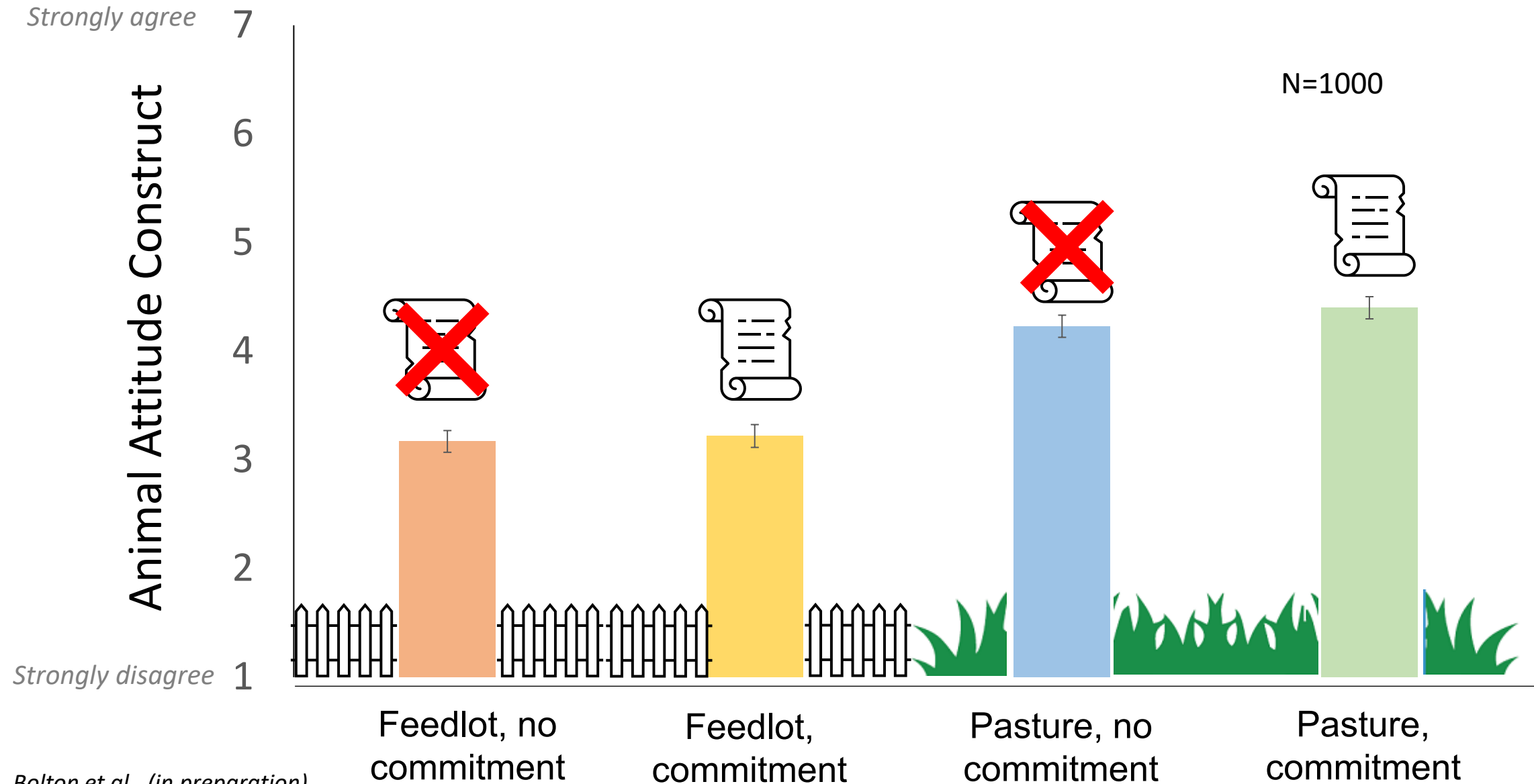
Pasture, no commitment

The [practice of slaughtering calves within 2 weeks of birth has occurred for decades](#). As an alternative, some farmers rear them until they are about 18 months of age. These animals are [kept in open paddocks and eat grass](#) until they are slaughtered for meat.

Feedlot, no commitment

The [practice of slaughtering calves within 2 weeks of birth has occurred for decades](#). As an alternative, some farmers rear them until they are about 18 months of age. These animals are [kept in pens with no access to grass and eat grain and hay](#) before being slaughtered for meat.

Overall, the Australian public had more favorable attitudes towards the life led by the animal in pasture-based systems



The road ahead

“We’re desensitised, everything is bad, everyone is out for money, the dairy industry is just one of many doing bad things. [...] to me it’s just another thing that is so complicated in life [...] and sometimes you just want to [...] ignore it which is a terrible thing.” (FG3)

“We know a lot of what goes on behind the scenes and I know for me, I do block it out and I just buy the product.” (FG1)



Community Focus Groups

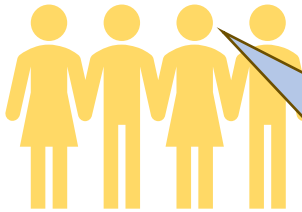
“I’m sort of rethinking why do I consume so much dairy? [...] It might be easier to go ‘oh well I like the taste of oat milk, I’ll just do that’ because now I hear more bad things about the dairy industry, [...] [learning about early life killing of surplus calves] might be the final push to not consume it anymore or consume a lot less of it.” (FG3)

The road ahead



Farmer Focus Groups

“Any outcome has to have a whole system approach and can’t focus on just [the bobby calf] issue. It has to acknowledge the [inter]dependence of what is going on.” (G1, S1)



Value Chain
Stakeholder Interviews

“We need to ultimately try and decide what’s the best solution that’s going to [find] fitness for purpose in every animal that we produce and from our whole food production sustainability perspective we’ve got these cows producing milk. If a high proportion of them are also producing beef from a calf, we’re reducing our environmental footprint collectively as well” (Interview 3)

Conclusions

Management of surplus calves is a highly complex, 'wicked' problem. Requires balancing social (ethical), economic, & environmental factors.

Citizen's core values play an influential role in their relationship with dairy, several practices fail to align with these values

Sustainable change will require long term, sustained dialogues that facilitate collaboration, leadership and integrate the needs of all stakeholders.



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Thank you

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