**BACKGROUND**

**The Australian Prawn industry**

Around 100 million prawns are produced in Australian prawn farms each year. 95% of farms are in Queensland, with one farm in New South Wales.

The definition of 'eyestalk ablation' from the Australian Prawn Farming Manual is:

*“a hatchery technique of macerating or destroying the eyestalk gland in female broodstock prawns to encourage spawning”.*

Cutting and squeezing a prawn's eye is the most common way ablation is done though there are other methods including cauterisation (a pair of heated forceps is applied to the eyestalk) and ligation (tying a thread or wire around the eyestalk causing it to fall off after a few days).

**The Science**A [study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271883879_Eyestalk_ablation_procedures_to_minimize_pain_in_the_freshwater_prawn_Macrobrachium_americanum) into the pain experienced by prawns whose eye was sliced open and crushed or ligated found that both procedures **caused prawns to become disoriented, flick their tail (an escape reflex) and rub the traumatised area** — all behaviours associated with pain. The ablated prawns were also less likely to seek shelter following the procedure, which researchers believe to indicate a degree of stress amongst these animals. The study concluded that: “*These procedures are traumatic not only because of the surgical treatment or ligation but also due to the subsequent discomfort and hormonal changes.”*

Scientist [Dr Robert Elwood](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-492557/Claws-concern-Scientists-suggest-prawns-lobsters-feel-pain-just-like-humans.html) has also studied the way prawns react to negative stimulus and concluded that their behaviour was "consistent with the interpretation of pain experience."

Further [studies](http://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822%2810%2901598-8) have found that prawns and other crustaceans are able to see polarized light, which humans can't. This superior vision helps them with navigating through water, seeing transparent or silvery prey, and avoiding predators. Destroying a prawn's eye not only destroys the hormonal gland moderating their reproduction, but impacts their vision as well. In a crowded farm environment, impaired vision is likely to increase the stress on these animals.

**The law**

Queensland animal welfare laws recognise prawns (invertebrates of the class malacostraca) as sentient ‘animals’ deserving of protection from cruelty. But this protection has not yet been enacted in regulations (as it has been for other invertebrates like squid and octopus). This is the technical ‘loophole’ that allows a cruel practice like eye-stalk ablation to continue.

Animals Australia has urged the Queensland Minister to prescribe protection to prawns in the regulations (as was intended when the *Animal Care and Protection Act* *2001* was passed).