

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: Across Australia, a vicious campaign against halal-certified companies is gaining momentum. A halal product is one that doesn't contain any traces of pork, blood or alcohol, meaning it's OK for Muslims to eat. Many products are halal-certified, even Vegemite. But anti-halal activists say they're fighting back against creeping sharia law, claiming the label is a tax on non-Muslims and the money for certification goes towards terrorism. Here's Alex Mann.

ALEX MANN, REPORTER: Six months ago, Fleurieu Milk & Yoghurt Company gained halal certification to supply a \$50,000 yoghurt contract with Emirates Airlines.

NICK HUTCHINSON, FLEURIEU MILK & YOGHURT COMPANY: It was a requirement of Emirates. We had to pay a \$1,000 fee. It opened up a business market to continue to become viable. It was a necessary step.

ALEX MANN: What do you understand halal to mean?

NICK HUTCHINSON: To be honest, up until a couple of weeks ago, my understanding wasn't great on halal certification. We knew it was a fee we had to pay around \$1,000 a year that allowed Muslims to consume our products on Emirates Airlines. Now, since then I've done a bit of research and so forth and we now know that halal certification doesn't need to be – you don't need halal certification for milk and yoghurt if it doesn't contain gelatin, which ours doesn't.

ALEX MANN: Keeping food and drink halal means no pork, blood or alcohol can be allowed anywhere in the production process.

The trouble began last month when Nick Hutchinson received an email asking to confirm whether his company had halal certification. His response was posted and shared across a network of anti-halal Facebook sites, unleashing a barrage of online hate.

FACEBOOK POST (male voiceover): What a crock of s**t. Cease halal certification now. You want halal? Go live in a Muslim country. Simple.

FACEBOOK POST II (male voiceover): It is sharia law that says these rag heads must eat halal food. We don't have sharia law here, therefore no halal products are required in this country!!!! It's all a scam to raise funds for terrorism!!!!

FACEBOOK POST III (female voiceover): Screw halal and all who make it.

ALEX MANN: What exactly were people saying to you?

NICK HUTCHINSON: The money goes towards terrorism, the – it's impacting on Australia's well-being, our standard of life is being taken over because you're paying these fees, allowing people of Islamic heritage to rule us. It come out of nowhere and happened quite quickly, because with one copy and paste onto these sites, you've gone from nobody knowing you're a halal certified to 100,000 people that are extremely against it. And when they work together, they can impact quite heavily on small businesses such as ours.

ALEX MANN: Within two days, Fleurieu Milk & Yoghurt Company decided to ditch its certification, forfeiting its contract with Emirates.

NICK HUTCHINSON: Yeah, it sucks. I hate saying it, but there's no other way to describe it. We gave in and decided that the negative publicity and the bullying outweighed what we were gaining from the halal certification.

ALEX MANN: The attack against Fleurieu was part of an organised online campaign against companies with halal certification.

KIRALEE SMITH, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, HALAL CHOICES: Hi, I'm Kiralee Smith, founder and director of Halal Choices. I love the freedom we have this nation. ... Don't be shouted down. You're not a racist or a bigot because you have concerns about fundamental Islam or halal certification. Talk, share and discuss this important issue with your family and friends.

ALEX MANN: Across Australia, a loose collection of anti-halal, anti-Islam and nationalistic groups has been targeting halal-certified food companies. The groups identify businesses and direct users to swarm their social media sites.

MIKE HOLT, RESTORE AUSTRALIA: First of all, this is Australia. We are not Islamic. We've also been – we've had this imposed on us without our permission. Did you ever vote in a referendum to allow halal certification of just about everything in the supermarket? I didn't. If they don't change their ways and start acting as patriotic Australians, they deserve what they get. It's market forces.

ALEX MANN: Mike Holt is an anti-mosque campaigner and a former One Nation candidate. He works with the other boycott groups to target companies like Fleurieu Milk.

MIKE HOLT: We are targeting various groups. We've been targeting Byron Bay Cookies. One thing you have to understand is Restore Australia works legally and we do not agree with abuse or threatening people, but we have no control over our supporters. There are people out there who get very, very passionate about this and they have made threats, which is unfortunate, but these companies have brought it on themselves.

ALEX MANN: The biggest anti-halal group, with more than 35,000 followers, is Boycott Halal in Australia. It claims certification costs push up prices and that the money for certification goes towards funding terrorism.

BOYCOTT HALAL IN AUSTRALIA FACEBOOK POST (male voiceover): One halal product = the next bullet that kills or maims. If you buy halal, you are indirectly funding terrorism.

NICK HUTCHINSON: One lady phoned me and asked if I was happy that we contributed towards the 9/11 attacks where she lost a few family members. Outrageous claims, something that – yeah, never expected, but yeah, it's quite ridiculous.

TRISH DELANEY, BOYCOTT HALAL IN AUSTRALIA: Companies ask for feedback, but it appears they don't like negative feedback, alright? I mean, I think it's fair to say that people from all walks of life should be able to ask, "Are you halal certified?" It's not a hard question.

ALEX MANN: Trish Delaney is one of Boycott Halal in Australia's resident keyboard warriors. She spends up to four hours a day online co-ordinating the campaign.

TRISH DELANEY: Myself, lots of the 34,000 people have written to the Government and asked the Government to please, do something about this and label it so that people can know that they have a choice. We don't mind or have anything against people eating halal food. We don't want to pay for it. We don't need it and we don't want to pay for it.

ALEX MANN: So why do you say that we're paying for it?

TRISH DELANEY: Because of the fees attached to the certification. Some companies say, "No, we absorb the costs," and we say, "Well you're not much of a business because businesses don't absorb costs, they pass it on to consumers."

ALEX MANN: On the NSW north coast, Byron Bay Cookie Company knows all about anti-halal campaigning. For months the company has suffered under the same sustained abusive campaign that targeted Fleurieu Milk Company.

KEITH BYRNE, BYRON BAY COOKIE COMPANY: When we've got the likes of our shop here in Byron Bay and we have a receptionist who has taken some of the phone calls which could – which were quite abusive and also emails that were quite abusive. That's when we had to say, "Hold on a second, we now need to get some more support on this," and we did have to actually bring in the police at that stage.

ALEX MANN: In spite of the opposition, he's decided to keep his certification.

KEITH BYRNE: Cookie Company is exporting to 40 countries worldwide. So, it's a huge benefit to us and it means that we can not only sustain our existing workforce, but we've expanded that over the last years and we're now one of the biggest employers now in Byron Bay, with 65 people. We decided to keep the certification because if we were to not have that certification, that would mean that we could lose multiple global contracts, which would mean I'd have to downsize my operation here in Byron Bay. That would mean I would lose employees.

ALEX MANN: Nick Hutchinson warns that boycott campaigners are damaging local companies.

NICK HUTCHINSON: If they were to take us down, being a local – all our profits remain in SA. If our businesses disappear, you're being run by companies in Japan or in Europe and these multinationals and is that better? Is that – our money going back there, is that a better option? Well, I'm sure most people agree it's not.

LEIGH SALES: Alex Mann reporting.