Crafted through Generations

WAmerino

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Roger Fletcher
Fletcher International Export

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Merino meets demand

By JODIE RINTOUL

Making money is the key for any operation and the Merino offers this on a number of fronts, due to its ability to hit a wide range of markets and be used successfully in a range of environments.

In terms of the products it produces and where they are sold, nothing beats the Merino which has been “Crafted through Generations” to ensure it continually improves. The Merino has become a more easy-care, plain-bodied animal with high fertility capable of producing both a superior wool clip and a meat product in demand.

It will be continually crafted by future generations through the use of new technologies such as electronic identification, Australian Sheep Breeding Values, more objective measurements for wool and meat as well as improved management practices and genetics, so it will provide even greater returns into the future.

Whether it is wool or meat, there are plenty of market options for the Merino.

Every year we see demand for Merino products increase as the world’s population increases and incomes grow in developing countries.

The growing demand for the clean, green products that Merinos provide has seen the breed’s value hold strong, with both wool and sheepmeat prices at some of the strongest levels seen in the past five years.

In terms of sheepmeat, the past 12 months has seen demand from new and existing markets remain solid and the future outlook appears positive. This in turn has seen sheep prices hold last year’s high values.

In the second last week of July (week ending July 24) Meat and Livestock Australia’s (MLA) weekly indicator report (includes Muchea Livestock Centre and Katanning prices) had mutton averaging 326¢/kg dressed compared to 294¢/kg in 2014. Export wethers were quoted at $99 a head right on par to last year’s $100 quote.

On the wool side of the equation the market is well up on the same time 12 months ago.

Through the months of May and June prices regularly rise with the Western Market Indicator (WMI) reaching a record level of 1426¢/kg clean in sale 530/14, smashing the June 2011 record of 1415¢/kg clean. Prices have eased recently with the WMI closing at 1251¢/kg clean in the second sale of the new season F02/15, before the three-week selling break.

In comparison in the same sale last year the WMI was at 1033¢/kg.

At the close of trading of sale F02 a 175kg bale of 21 micron wool of good style, sound fleece wool, with a 66 per cent yield was worth $1585 this is at the 79 per cent decile of the last five years and 95¢c since 1991.

In mid-July last year a bale of the same description was worth $1385.

Going forward these wool prices look like they are here to stay with many brokers predicting a tightening of supply in coming months as a result of the strong wool prices in May and June bringing old wool on to the market which had been in storage.

As you read this publication you will come across stories on commercial operations from Grass Patch in the south to Shark Bay in the north to Mukinbudin in the east and right through the Great Southern, that have all realised the important role Merinos play.

They are all full of praise for the breed saying:

"We have never thought about going completely cropping because we see our sheep as a very important part of our farming business.”

"Having both meat and wool market options is a safe way to be at the moment because it gives you more choices.”

"Merinos are tried and proven performers thanks to their dual purpose nature.”

"I truly believe they are the only dual-purpose sheep breed around.”

"Nothing has stood the test of time like the Merino.”

"The economics of other breeds just haven’t stacked up against it.”

"We enjoy the flexibility of the two market options Merinos provide.”

"I don’t think you can beat the two incomes from one animal.”

"Having sheep in the system makes our cropping enterprise work much better and we farm more cost effectively.”

"The Merino breed continues to be the perfect fit for mixed farming operations because of its dual purpose and robust nature.”

"Having sheep means we can still get a return on land that is either unproductive or having a rest from cropping.”

"The benefits of having the Merino operation are too great to ignore.”

In today’s agricultural operations there is no room for onlookers or production systems which fail to stack up and make a profit and this is why Merinos are now a must on any WA farming property.

With solid meat and wool markets and the versatility the Merino has to offer means the rewards are there for producers to grab, it is just a case of ensuring they produce a quality product through correct and better management processes.
A positive time for WA Merinos

President’s report by STEVEN BOLT
President Stud Merino Breeders’ Association of WA

Welcome to the 2015 WA State Merino magazine which certainly will provide an insightful and informative view of the members of the Stud Merino Breeders’ Association of WA (SMBWA) and upcoming dates and events.

I would like to welcome local, interstate and international visitors and trust your time will be enjoyed viewing the quality of the WA Merinos that are displayed.

The sheep industry in WA is certainly enjoying great demand and return for wool and meat as a result of recent solid increases in wool prices and ongoing strong prices for slaughter sheep.

The selection by WA Merino breeders for generally dual-purpose characteristics, has seen both them and their clients capitalise on these current market conditions now and set them up for the future.

Certainly the winter has provided a challenging environment for many areas in the State with very low rainfall to date and we are all hoping the spring will provide a better time for all.

Congratulations to Wayne Button our newly elected vice president and welcome to Mitch Hogg, who has joined our State committee.

Thank you to all of our existing committee for their efforts throughout the coming year. The committee is certainly committed to working for all our members to promote the WA Merino stud industry.

We are also keen to encourage the next generation of breeders, by providing opportunities to become involved in the many activities that we provide and support.

There are exciting times ahead for the newly formatted Rabobank WA Sheep Expo and Sale, which is set to involve the State’s premier ram sale, along with field day displays from more than 40 studs.

It will also include sheep handling designs, treatments and new technology.

I would like to commend the Expo committee for its work to make this two-day event a great success.

There has certainly been a focus to create opportunities for the youth with the implementation of the Ag School Wether Challenge which is held at the IGA Perth Royal Show, sponsorship of many judging awards throughout the State and the inaugural WA State Ag School Sheep Handling Challenge competition, which is set to be unleashed in Katanning at the WA Sheep Expo and Sale involving some 64 students in shearing, wool handling, classing and prime lamb judging.

Thank you to all of our sponsors, particularly accounting firm RSM Bird Cameron for their continued support of our Merino magazine.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who volunteer their time throughout the year at our many events.

I see the Merino industry in WA well placed to grow with the increasing demand for our products continuing and wish you all a rewarding season.

In closing, I would like to note the sad passing of one of our life members, Frank McGill whose passion and dedication to the Merino industry will be sadly missed.

2015 Stud Merino Breeders’ Association of WA committee

WITH 23 sale days where the Western Indicator (WI) finished up, 16 where it was down, and only two where it didn’t move, the western wool market has been something of a Merino mystery ride so far this year.

The year started much the same as other recent years, with Merino fleece and pieces prices retreating from pre-Christmas highs and with large bale numbers on offer nationally.

Over the first 21 sale days at the Western Wool Centre (WWC), the WI bobbed along with small movements either way – on 10 days it slipped slightly lower and 11 days it eased up, nothing unusual.

Then on Thursday, March 26, the Merino mystery ride started and the WI began a steady climb which continued unabated for 11 straight sale days.

Up to that March 26 sale, the price differential between 18-micron fine wool and 21-micron medium wool varied from 36 cents a kilogram clean on January 21 to 81c on March 18, but the average differential was about 64c.

There was a bit of a jolt for the WI on Thursday, May 14, with the steady rise interrupted by a one-day price correction.

At that sale the price differential between 18 and 21-micron wools was out to 132c/kg, the widest gap so far this year, as the best prices wool growers had seen since the record 2010-11 season started to draw special lots of high-quality fine and superfine wool out of store.

But the market was back in ‘buy’ mode the following week and the mystery ride continued with the WI on a steeper climb into uncharted territory.

This coincided with the WWC transitioning to a fortnight of single sale days followed by a week’s break due to the annual decline in bale numbers towards the end of the selling season and financial year.

Restricted auction sale opportunities coupled with rising markets in Melbourne and Sydney – which continued with two-day sales – created pent-up demand in the west.

The WWC hummed with anticipation on sale days as brokers were in and out of the sale viewing room at regular intervals to check on prices and who was buying.

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The consensus of opinion seemed to be that the Chinese government had agreed to a manufacturing-sector stimulation package to help its flagging economy – including its woollen mills, but nobody knew specific details.

It was also impossible to tell whether China, which takes nearly three quarters of the national wool clip, was buying more than usual and whether that extra demand was behind the price hike.

On Wednesday, June 10, the WI peaked at a new record of 1428c/kg. There was strong demand right across all fleece wool types and particularly strong demand for 19-22 micron medium wools which closed the price differential between 18 and 21 micron wools to 6c.

There was also strong demand for Merino carding and skirtings, locks and crutchings, with bidding in the pieces auction room often more frenetic than in the fleece room during the build-up to June 10.

Then came another much larger jolt, on June 24, followed by a steady decline over the next four sale days leading up to the Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX) open-cry auction system’s annual three-week break, as the WI followed Eastern markets down.

Wool brokers are optimistic that the Merino mystery ride they’ve been on over the past four months will turn out to be like the gentle, scenic Sky Lift at Adventure World in the second half of the year, not the heart-stopping Abyss roller coaster.

Was the WI’s 177c decline from record before the annual break just the natural sag between high points in the Sky Lift cable, or was it the edge of the vertical drop of the Abyss? That’s the question the wool industry has been asking.

“When you look at the selling season, it’s been a series of rises with corrections in between, but each rise has been at a higher percentage than the previous one,” veteran Primaries broker Tim Chapman pointed out.

“The peak was a little bit unexpected and out of the ordinary and probably caused by some pressure to buy.”

There’s been some forward cover activity (Riemann wool forwards), it’s only a small percentage of the overall market, but it’s an indication that demand will continue.

“I’m optimistic that it (western wool market) will continue to bounce along about this (current) level.”

His optimism was backed up by Elders wool manager Danny Burkett who said a shortage of wool had been an “obvious help” to the rising market since the end of March.

Depleted wool stores right across Australia meant that unsatisfied demand from before the annual break was likely to continue through the second half of the year with spring offerings unable to be supplemented from store.

“There is a strong argument to say that the market will continue on a higher base and the lower Australian dollar has certainly helped,” Mr Burkett said.

For wool growers who shear in the autumn, returns this year have certainly been very good and many achieved prices between $300 and $400 a bale higher than last year.

AWEX statistics indicated that at the start of the year a 185kg bale of 17-micron Merino wool was worth $1505, a bale of 19-micron wool worth $1424 and a bale of 21-micron wool $1370.

A 5kg cut off a Merino ewe producing 19-micron wool was worth $38 while a 6kg cut at 21 microns was worth $44.

On the June 10 market high, according to AWEX, those bales were worth $1936 for 17-micron, $1807 for 19-micron and $1750 for 21-micron wool. The fleece cuts were worth $49 and $57.

Despite the price decline since then, after the last sale before the three-week break bales were worth $1733 for 17 micron, $1590 for 19 micron and $1550 for 21 micron, with the fleece cuts worth $40 and $50.

Shearing patterns continued to change this year, according to AWEX, with more farmers choosing to shear their main flock in the very late summer or autumn and with pre and post-Christmas auction offering bale numbers ebbing out.

However, changed shearing patterns probably have more to do with easier management of cropping programs than with autumn prices, according to brokers.

One thing that is quite clear from AWEX statistics, is that the Australian dollar’s decline to 73 US cents has helped counteract the wool price rises for major customer China which buys wool in US dollars. The AWEX graph of the WI over the past 12 months, but calculated in US cents rather than Australian cents, shows that it is now back to what it was in early December, having been lower for much of the first six months of the year.

In terms of China buying wool, the WI only topped US1000c on nine of the 72 WWC sale days in the past year.
Fleece funnies

WHILE selling WA’s wool clip has been a serious business, it has had its lighter moments to relieve the pressure.

Dyson Jones Wool auctioneer Lyndon Hosking admitted he was momentarily taken aback when a buyer first yelled “gorilla” — a slang term for 1000 — at him during the June 10 auction which saw the Western Index hit a record high.

Another wool auctioneer tells how the WWC selling room erupted into laughter at a subsequent auction when a wag of a buyer called out “1080” — the old fox bait poison — as a joke.

The auctioneer admitted that in full cry, he could not stop himself repeating the call before the joke dawned on him.
I T was 10 or so bales of 73 millimetre, 17.5 micron ewe weaner wool which landed the Thompson family’s Moojepin Multi-Purpose Merino (MPM) stud in the spotlight of AWI’s Fibre of Football campaign.

A phone call from the Thompson’s local Primaries wool broker Tim Chapman earlier in the year alerted them to the fact their Katanning clip had been snapped up by AWI to be a part of the campaign.

A staunch West Coast Eagles fan, David said the Fibre of Football campaign demonstrates that wool isn’t just for the catwalk but can be targeted to a myriad of audiences in Australia and throughout the world.

“It would be great if all AFL merchandise was made from wool because there’s no fibre more Australian – it’s a great product,” he said.

Mr Thompson said it was difficult to comment on his wool’s selection seeing as he doesn’t know where it’s ended up. He said it was a relief to know that his wool had contributed to the campaign and added that as a wool farmer it was pleasing to see woolers get recognition.

Merino the

By TRAVIS KING

It is hard to pick which Duane King is a bigger fan of – wool or the West Coast Eagles. So it is appropriate that Duane and his father Max had a batch of their wool selected in Australian Wool Innovation’s Fibre of Football campaign.

The pair farm at Northam and wool has been a fabric of their farming life ever since the family moved to their current property 30 years ago.

A wool man through and through, Duane started his working life as a shearer and then wool classer, so it is no surprise that he and Max have stuck with wool through the good and bad times.

They run 1000 Merino ewes on their 485 hectare property that is situated right on the outskirts of the Northam townsite.

While the wool and sheep industry is definitely looking good at the moment, Duane said farming economics has required him to work off farm, to supplement income.

For a number of years he has worked fly-in, fly-out in the mining industry, saying the most recent job’s two weeks on and one week off roster enabled him to enjoy farming while making a living on the mines.

Given the downturn in mining, that job was no longer available but Duane said at the time it was...
fibre fit for all occasions

know what the parameters of the criteria are, however he’s pleased his clip fits the guidelines.

The Thompson family has been growing wool in Katanning – home of the Katanning Wanderers football club – since the 1980s and has stuck with the pastime because of their passion for the Merino industry.

Mr Thompson also credits his dedication to wool growing to the founding and development of the Multi-Purpose Merino (MPM).

“I’ve never looked at Merino breeding in terms of wool or carcass traits,” he said.

“MPMs have allowed us to consider the Merino breed as a complete animal, providing the very best wool and meat traits without compromising one or the other.

“MPMs have helped me stay in the wool industry because it’s such a dual purpose Merino type.

“We breed sheep that produce plenty of progeny and dual purpose meat traits as well as a fabulous fibre on its back.”

Mr Thompson said they had bred their flock to be as low maintenance as possible.

“Like most Merino producers, I’d prefer to have forward contracts with certain brands but it’s not happening here,” he said.

“We probably don’t get enough feedback about where our wool has gone into making. It is rewarding as a grower to feel the product that your wool is a part of,” he said.

“We have lost a little bit of wool, but we have made that back in less labour and easier care.”

“One of the biggest things that Mr Thompson said has undoubtedly been a major key to the business’ breeding success.

The Thompsons have taken a different position to breeding Merinos, steering away from the traditional wool focus.

Deliberately concentrating on growth, muscle and fat traits has allowed them to drive profitability and breed an all-round type Merino animal.

Moojepin mates about 2700 ewes and 500 ewe lambs each year.

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The Kings don’t target any particular stud for rams, instead being happy to buy any ram that suits their breeding aims.

“We aim to produce a 21.5 micron average for our fleece wool,” Duane said.

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Footy and wool intertwined

By MAL GILL

ITH a passion for wool and football, it is only fitting some of Darkan farmer Mark Wunnenberg’sclip was chosen by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) for its Fibre of Football campaign. Mark is a fourth-generation Merino wool grower and both he and his late father Ivan were captain and playing coach of their beloved West Arthur Bulldogs football team, now merged with Wagin as the Wagin Bulldogs. The Fibre of Football campaign was designed to highlight the traditional connections between wool and football.

AWI purchased bales of Merino wool across Australia in the normal way and collaborated in producing a range of heritage-style Australian Football League memorabilia - jumpers, scarves, beanies and gloves - in club colours and sold through AFL clubs and the AFL online shop.

It was only when AWI decided to trace the Fibre of Football wool back to each of the growers who had produced it that the connection with a football-playing family of WA Merino wool growers was discovered.

Mark was one of four WA farmers who supplied wool for AWI’s Fibre of Football.

“It’s nice knowing that this product (a Fibre of Football Richmond scarf and beanie which was made using some of his own wool. His dog Sampi was named after former Eagles player Ashley Sampi. An Eagles supporter, Darkan farmer Mark Wunnenberg shows off his son’s Fibre of Football heritage Richmond scarf and beanie which was made using some of his own wool. His dog Sampi was named after former Eagles player Ashley Sampi.

Mark followed in his father’s footsteps. “He played for Mines Rovers in Collie for a few years, and then played for the WA Men’s State side, which is the Country All-Stars which he represented WA in Tasmania,” he said.

“He played league for West Arthur from when I was 16 until 34, apart from one year I played with Collie. I was captain and coach from 1996-98 and we made the finals one year.”

After I retired from league I kept playing with the reserves until I was 40, the last few years with the merged Wagin Bulldogs.

“I represented the UGFL at Country Week Carnivals a number of times.” These days, Mark’s competitive spirit is played out on the greens.

“Dad played WA State schoolboys football in 1956, he represented WA in Tasmania,” he said.

“He played for Mines River in the South West Football League and was selected to play centre half-forward in the association team at 18."

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These days, Mark’s competitive spirit is played out on the greens.

He plays pennants for Darkan Bowling Club and was a member of the Country All-Stars which played the WA Men’s State side last summer.

Mark’s great-grandfather came from the goldfields to the Collie area in 1905 and while working his trade as a blacksmith on the coal fields, went on to Bodalup, between Collie and Dardanup, at weekends to clear his land by hand.

It took him three years. Other properties were acquired in the area as the family and its interests expanded and for a time the various properties were farmed collaboratively by Mark’s extended family.

His father was born at nearby Bowelling and moved to the Bodalup property which he farmed with his uncle Joe. Mark now farms an adjacent property with his wife Karen, Cohen and daughters Mia, 21, and Lily, 19.

Mark’s extended family.

“My philosophy is I grow as much of it as I can, it’s as simple as that.”

In 1998 he was part of an industry tour of woolen mills in Korea and China which helped reinforce his enthusiasm for wool.

“The tour was really good. But hectic - something like 11 flights in eight days. I learned what happens to my wool after it leaves the farm and that gives you a greater appreciation of it,” he said.

“The technology is so good these days that wool produces a very soft and wearable product that’s very versatile. It’s a quality product.

“Mark is a happy farmer who believes passionately in what he does.

“Besides that, I like sheep,” he said.

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“I’d rather chase sheep than drive a piece of machinery (cropping) any day.”
FORMER shearer turned Merino wool grower and stud breeder, Jeremy King, Rangeview stud, Darkan, has a positive outlook on the future of wool.

“What would you rather wear, a natural fibre that is produced from grass, or a synthetic fibre that is produced from oil?” is the question he asks in return when asked about the future of his industry.

“Wool is unique, it’s a clean, green fibre. These days, where something comes from, how it’s made and what impact it has on the environment are important considerations for more and more consumers,” Jeremy, a fourth generation Merino wool grower, said.

He was one of four WA woolgrowers whose wool was selected to supply pure Merino wool for a Fibre of Football range of heritage style AFL jumpers, scarves, beanies and gloves produced in conjunction with Australian Wool Innovation (AWI). Jeremy, 44, who farms with his wife Melinda and parents John and Geraldine, also appeared with his father in The Fibre of Football video produced by AWI to tell the story of the traditional link between football and wool.

“We try to produce the best quality wool - a nice, soft white wool - that we can for the conditions here,” he said.

“We’ve been a bit finer (in micron) in the past, but that was probably too fine, we’ve tried shearing every eight to nine months, but that was too difficult, so now we do our main shearing in the autumn.

“We breed for a wool that handles the environment and for a sheep that is most profitable for us.”

The King’s average adult ewe wool cut is 6.8 kilograms.

“Dad employed a New Zealand rousethrough one year and after he’d picked up a few fleeces he asked why we didn’t shear every year!” he said.

“The fleeces were heavier than what he was used to and he thought we only sheared every second year.”

Jeremy’s, great-grandfather was a wool classer in the New South Wales Riverina district and came to the Upper Great Southern from Echuca on the Murray River before 1906.

“He took up and cleared an area of 10,000 acres,” he said.

“Then he asked why we didn’t shear every year!” he said.

With at best, seven years to change a genome type, they say you only get seven goes to get it right,” he said.

The ability to benefit from both the wool and meat from Merinos is the reason Jeremy has not considered other breeds.

“With the Merino you get two enterprises that have nothing to do with each other - wool and meat - off the one animal,” he said.

“That’s what actually makes the Merino the most profitable. Merino ewes are the backbone of the meat industry, our cast for age ewes go for meat.

“New Zealand tests have shown Merino meat is the most flavoursome.

“So you’ve got a self-replacing asset that provides two products - that adds to the security of farming Merinos because it spreads the risk.”

While his time is now taken up with the day-to-day running of Rangeview and he employs a contractor to shear his flock, Jeremy has fond memories of his time as a shearer working the sheds across NSW.

He still puts in time on the boards each year just to keep his hand in and to protect his stud investment by shearing the stud rams.

A lifetime of growing wool

By MAL GILL

Jeremy King proudly shows off a Fibre of Football heritage style Fremantle Dockers jumper which was made using some of his own wool. In the background is his father John and some of their Rangeview rams.
THE Woolmark Company and premier fashion and lifestyle clothing manufacturer Sportscraft have continued their long-standing partnership with the release of a winter Merino wool collection.

All of the beautifully soft wool garments in the collection possess the iconic Woolmark symbol signifying pure new wool and the highest quality.

Founded in 1914 as a door-to-door tailoring business by young Russian migrant Woolf Bardas, Sportscraft celebrated its centenary last August.

The brand's centenary celebrations acknowledged one of the highlights of its 100 years was winning the first 'Pure New Wool' license from The Woolmark Company's predecessor, the Australian Wool Board in 1964.

Adrian Jones, chief executive officer of APG & Co which owns the Sportscraft brand, said it was proud to continue carrying the internationally-renowned Woolmark symbol today.

"We're incredibly proud of our 101-year history and ongoing relationship with The Woolmark Company," Mr Jones said.

"It's a name synonymous with unsurpassed quality, which is a leading value of our Sportscraft brand."

The Woolmark Company managing director Stuart McCullough said Sportscraft is one of Australia's most iconic brands.

"The long history of collaboration between the two brands reinforces the mutual commitment to supporting the Australian wool industry and highlighting the beauty of the world's finest fibre, Australian Merino wool," Mr McCullough said.

Newly-signed Sportscraft brand ambassador, international actress Naomi Watts, is helping promote the new winter collection.

She said her love of luxurious soft wool pieces made her a perfect fit for the winter campaign which showcases Sportscraft's style.

"I'm drawn to Sportscraft's modern simplicity and classic style, in particular their beautiful woods and textures," Ms Watts said.

"It triggers fond memories of growing up in Australia."

For this winter the modern-knit jumpers, chunky turtle-necks and cardigans, coats and luxurious dresses are in camel, grey, taupe, cream and winter white tones livened by pops of tangelo orange and citrus.

Key pieces include luxe wool winter coats in soft pinks and grey, chunky sleeveless knits in grey and taupe, sophisticated suiting and a range of Merino wool essentials perfect for winter layering.

Sportscraft is one of Australia's most trusted and enduring fashion and lifestyle brands renowned for outstanding quality and consistent fit.

It produces a range of quality men's and women's clothing and accessories sold in more than 230 locations around Australia including freestanding and concession stores such as David Jones and Myer, and online at www.sportscraft.com.au.

Certified Australian non-mulesed wool is used in its core Merino knitwear ranges. The Woolmark Company is the global authority on wool and its symbol is recognised internationally as an assurance of the highest quality.

It is a subsidiary of Australian Wool Innovation, a not-for-profit enterprise owned by more than 25,000 woolgrowers.
Australian Wool Innovation

Your wool levy at work

Lifting production with Lifetime Ewe Management: www.wool.com/ltem

Reducing wild dog predation: www.wool.com/wilddogs

Shearer and woolhandler training: www.wool.com/shearertraining

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Reducing input costs, exploring new systems: www.wool.com/productionsystems

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Australian Wool Innovation Limited gratefully acknowledge the matching funds provided by the Australian Government to support the research and development detailed in this publication.
Taking a lesson in wool design

By BOBBIE HINKLEY

THERE’S at it again! Some of the country’s most clever and creative young minds are in the throes of designing garments for the 2015 Wool4School competition.

The wool fibre’s timeless and versatile nature has seen it thrust into a large number of schools via the Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) program which is currently in its fifth year. This year more than 9000 secondary students from 700 Australian schools are taking part in the program as part of the food and fibre component of the national curriculum.

Re-defining wool for thousands of young Australians, the Wool4School competition is for Year 7 to 11 design and technology, visual arts, home economics and textile design students keen on creating their own winter garments.

This year’s competition theme ‘Live Life, Love Wool’ is the student design competition, Wool4School. The wool fibre’s timeless and versatile nature has seen it thrust into a large number of schools via the Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) program which is currently in its fifth year. This year more than 9000 secondary students from 700 Australian schools are taking part in the program as part of the food and fibre component of the national curriculum.

Asian students take a wool interest

Asian students are being captivated by the student design competition, Wool4School. In its first foray overseas, more than 300 students in Hong Kong entered a modified competition by tracing, designing and describing garments using Australian Merino wool. Along with the Hong Kong Government’s Education Bureau (HKEB), Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) targeted students from junior and senior schools to live life and love wool as per the 2015 theme.

The partnership with HKEB worked to assist AWI’s Hong Kong office to promote, liaise and introduce the Wool4School competition into schools throughout Hong Kong as well as educate a new generation about the benefits, properties and versatility of Australian wool.

“We visited junior and senior secondary schools in Hong Kong to brief teachers about the competition and the versatility of the fibre,” AWI’s Hong Kong manager Alex Lai said.

“We received positive feedback from teachers who reported students were excited to learn about the fibre and were amazed that wool is not just a fibre for winter but a fibre for all seasons. “We’re in the process of organising more work shops tailored to students interested in learning about Australian wool and its natural benefits.”

Under the theme ‘Live Love, Love Wool’ students in Hong Kong were also asked to choose New York City, Paris or Moscow as their source of inspiration – Sydney and Shanghai were also added to the list. Their design also needed to comprise more than 80 per cent Australian Merino wool and be suitable for their chosen city’s climate.

Like the Australian competition, those taking part also had to provide with their design illustration a mood board and annotations for evaluation.

Influential Australian designer Jonathan Ward, who has been an integral Wool4School partner in Australia since its inception, made the final decision for both the junior and senior winners.

“The junior winner has presented an amazing design utilising wool on a velvet, reflecting the style and sophistication of Paris,” he said.

The senior winner showcased excellent overall presentation and embraced all features and benefits of wool innovation and design creativity.

“This is shown through her flamboyant reflection of New York’s Broadway.”

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try its hand at something new. “I’ve been receiving Wool4School information from AWI for a few years now and thought it high-time to give it a try,” Ms Sivyer said.

After thinking about involving NSW for a few years now Ms Sivyer said it seemed logical given that Narrogin is in the heart of the State’s wheat and sheep growing belt. “We’re surrounded by shearing sheds,” she said.

Many of the girls have farm backgrounds and those who don’t certainly are living a rural existence. “As a teacher it’s great. “There’s lots of support from AWI and what seems to be an endless supply of online resources - far more than I could ever fit into the classroom program.”

“Wool4School has certainly provided us with lots of interesting ideas and the program has been very well put together.”

With 1040 very high quality entries among 10,000 registered students from 400 participating schools, the classroom fashion design competition also reached new heights last year. The theme of “Woolmark in 50 years of fashion” engaged students who designed for their favourite era from the 1960s to today.

Amongst-Walabi School student Clancy Davies-Etheridge, Orange, New South Wales, took out the Year 10 division of the 2014 Wool4School competition and her entry caught the eye of the judges. “It’s just as we work with textile specialists, manufacturers and designers around the world explaining the endless possibilities of our natural fibre, we are delighted to also offer Australian students many resources associated with the farm to fashion story as well,” AWI group manager for trade education Julie Davies said.

The website has been designed so teachers can search for resources by year level and subject area, with AWI receiving positive feedback from teachers using the site. “The Year 9/10 Agricultural Technologies section of the Learn About Wool website has been a great resource for our Year 9 Ag Technology class, with clear and easy to read fact sheets,” Corinda State High School agriculture, maths and science teacher Janet Cleary said.

“The selection of video clips offered is also a great resource, as is the teachers’ kit full of samples of fleeces and fabrics.” “The wool package is a fantastic resource for teachers and I have been trying to spread the word,” Wurruk Primary School teacher Vicky McNaughton said.

“Kids had no idea of the process of wool and the materials are engaging and interesting.” “I highly rate it and recommend it for all schools.” Extensive digital resources associated with the Wool4School program and Learn About Wool can also be found on Scootle, the online gateway to high-quality, searchable teaching resources aligned to the Australian Curriculum.

Woolgrowers and parents. Contact your local school and encourage them to incorporate the Learn About Wool resources into their lessons. Hard copy Learn About Wool fact sheets, posters, fibre, yarn and fabric samples are also available for schools only (one kit per school). Contact teacherskit@wool.com or go to www.learnaboutwool.com or www.wool4school.com. Source: Beyond the Bale
While the trading environment for WA sheep meat processors has not been as buoyant as last year, they are still pleased with returns from most international markets.

Last year producers experienced strong demand from live exporters, processors and traditional winter supply shortages in the sale yards, which boosted confidence with ewe prices as high as $172.50, however the market has withdrawn over the last 12 months.

Since the peak last year WAMMCO chief executive officer Coll MacRury said the Chinese market had dropped off.

"The prices have become soft," he said.

"China was the big driver for revenue for the last few years, and it has halved the price."

"It started to deteriorate and hasn't come back."

Mr MacRury said while the deterioration of the price had affected WA processors, he hoped it may change.

He said producers could expect good livestock prices in spring but warned values must remain in line with end market returns, referring to the saleyard pressures from the eastern Australian restockers, which were exerting a strong market influence.

He predicted prices for members who delivered lambs in the 2014-15 season would receive a 40c/kg rebate and 20c/kg for lamb and mutton respectively.

"I think it will come back, but I don't think it will come back in a hurry," he said.

"China has a lot of frozen inventory."

"New Zealand had a big lamb kill this past season and there is a lot of New Zealand inventory in the Chinese market, until they get through that I don't think there will be any big price increase for quite a while."

The downward movement of the dollar had improved Australia's competitiveness in international trade but WAMMCO was facing more competition, particularly in the Chinese market from New Zealand, which would enjoy tariff-free trade from 2016 under its negotiated Free Trade Agreement.

For sheep and lamb processing plants in WA and the Eastern States, lack of supply to satisfy demand for both the domestic and international markets was due to record high lamb slaughter rates and lack of rain.

"It was going to hit the wall when it rained, and that's what it did," Fletcher International Narrikup abattoir general manager Greg Cross said of the eastern situation.

"Over the past two years, we have closed over the July period."

"We use this time to do general maintenance, so we have less down time during production periods."

Mr Cross said the WA sheep and lamb processing sector was in a different situation, and said it is experiencing a traditional July break.

"You are seeing the drought in most parts (of the east) has broken, and that has put the brakes on the availability of livestock," he said.

"We have a different environmental situation – we've been finding in June and July, for most years, farmers are preparing their crops and because the rains are coming, livestock availability is not always there, so that's why we shut down during that period."

For WAMMCO, Mr MacRury said the season could look similar to last year, if the rains continue in WA.

"Supply shouldn't be a huge issue, the biggest issue we have in WA is the weather," he said.

"We need a bit of rain so we don't have a big dry off and end up with a lot of little lambs."

"Luckily most of the big lambing areas, like the Great Southern have had a reasonable season, but certainly some of the northern areas and the Wheatbelt have been doing it tough."

"It's a big problem for us, we don't want it all to come at once, we have world markets to serve, we want it all weeks of the year."
New DNA sourcing technology, which can verify livestock’s parentage, diagnose of disease and track genomics, is set to revolutionise the way producers get DNA samples from sheep.

The traditional way of collecting DNA with the use of blood cards is being overshadowed by the new Allflex Tissue Sampling Unit (TSU) technology.

TSUs use the ear to collect a tissue sample and will replace tail hair, blood, semen and other sample types used for DNA, Pestivirus and other serology testing.

“There are issues with blood cards including contamination, preparation and collection of too much or not enough blood,” Allflex sheep business manager Jim Meckiff said.

“The TSU is already coded with the animal’s identification number, so there is a very low chance of incorrectly labelling and the samples being corrupted through human error.”

TSUs have been widely embraced in New Zealand and Australia’s dairy and beef industries and will be trialled by major sheep groups in Victoria.

The Balmoral Sire Evaluation Group is embracing the new technology after it deemed it was too labour intensive to use blood cards to obtain the pedigree of nearly 2000 ewes in the trial.

“I’m confident it will become the sampling method of choice due to its simplicity, accuracy and speed – the TSU is being viewed favourably by people in the industry,” Mr Meckiff said.

He said the new technology also improved animal welfare outcomes due to reduced stress on livestock and handlers.

“It is significantly quicker and easier – the sampling becomes a bloodless task where as blood cards involve cutting or nipping the ear. There is also reduced handling of the sheep,” Mr Meckiff said.

TSUs use barcoded vials which are linked to the sheep’s identification tags, the barcode allows for farm record-keeping and automated handling during the laboratory processes.

“Mr Meckiff said the TSU linked the latest technologies from EIDs through to genomics.

“You can test the parentage of progeny and it also lends itself completely to genomic testing as well, which helps breeders identify superior animal genetics,” he said.

While the TSU costs more than a blood card, Mr Meckiff said it was a premium, efficient DNA sampling technology which included sealed sample to avoid sample contamination risks and labelled unit to ensure the accurate ID of samples.

“When a DNA test costs $50 you don’t want the sample to fail,” he said.
THE importance of the live export trade to the WA sheep industry has been reinforced by the latest export figures out of Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA).

While WA exports of live sheep dropped from 96 per cent in May 2014 to 83.3 per cent in May 2015 for total exports out of Australia, WA is still easily the largest volume export State in Australia.

Australian Livestock Exporters’ Council (ALEC) chief executive officer Alison Penfold said in the past 12 months sheep export markets have been expanding, there has been ambitious live export trade, Australia has exported animal welfare practices and has implemented new technology into the welfare system abroad to create a sustainable live export future.

“WA is predominantly a sheep market and we need to try keep our focus on how we can continue with opportunities with sheep,” Ms Penfold said.

Important markets such Bahrain and Egypt, traditionally larger sheep importing countries reopened last year and have been increasing demand.

In well-established markets, particularly Gulf countries like the UAE, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar, there is still strong growth according to MLA predictions.

WA’s largest market for live sheep is Kuwait, which has held that position since 2005/06.

During the 2013/14 financial year, 39 per cent of WA’s live sheep were exported to Kuwait according to the latest Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA) industry data and trends ‘Sheep Notes’ publication.

Ms Penfold said while Kuwait imports were down 21 per cent this year, the UAE had been a standout for Australia and taken up some of that drop off.

“It has doubled its imports,” she said.

“We have also had some breeders shipments and sheep going to Egypt and China.”

Department officer and Sheep Notes co-author Kate Pritchett said WA exported sheep meat to more than 50 countries this last year.

Ms Pritchett said almost all sheep exports from WA were destined to the Middle East.

“In 2014-15, live export volumes were on track to reach a similar level, with Kuwait remaining the largest market,” she said.

The second largest market in recent years has been Qatar where WA exported 23 per cent of the total live sheep exported during 2013/14. Apart from 2010/11, live exports to Qatar have been generally increasing since 2005/06.

The re-emergence of trade to Bahrain, which stopped in 2012, was big news for industry last year. The reopening of the market has increased imports nationally from 19 per cent from May 2014 to May 2015, and while it is positive news Ms Penfold said there may be changes to come.

“Bahrain has done just over 340,000 head over the last 11 months of 2014/15,” she said.

“Bahrain will be an interesting scenario for both live and boxed meat as they are removing the (government) subsidy in a month or two, so no one quite knows how that will play out.”

As for the Saudi market, Ms Penfold is confident that market will open at some stage.

“I know there is still a lot of eagerness to crack open Saudi,” she said.

“Frustratingly we still have not cracked the animal welfare code to be able to do so.

“We will get there, I believe that there are a lot of determined people who want it to happen, which is a positive going forward.

“It is a priority for industry in terms of an existing market that is not yet open under ESCAS conditions.”

Ms Penfold said Saudi remains a market of importance for exporters.

“To be able to put a market which could potentially take one million head a year is a serious proposition and could potentially change investment decisions that producers have made.”

While supply has been an issue in the past, Ms Penfold said it is better having markets open than having nowhere for supply to go.

“From my perspective, it is difficult for producers to make the necessary investment decisions if
there are markets like Saudi, with huge potential, not open,” she said.

Ms Penfold said from a WA perspective the share of sheep exports are down, although it is still the biggest supplier, so it is positive.

“Our challenge is always going to be supply,” Ms Penfold said.

“This is in the hands of producers.

“We hope the figure around market access, with the support of the Australian Government and Federal Agriculture Minister, which we appreciate, the work that we are doing around welfare assurance and building a better version of ESCAS is indeed work we are doing in building animal welfare.

“There are very signals that this is an industry that’s building sustainability more than it has ever done in the past.

“I think producers want to see it and we need to demonstrate these improvements.”

Newly elected president to the Sheepmeat Council of Australia (SCA) and Beverley sheep farmer Jeff Murray said he had received a number of phone calls from WA producers with some concerns.

“When you have $120 wethers and those sheep and their mothers are being fed lupins all winter in some cases, it makes them pretty expensive to produce and producers are not getting the same good prices as last year,” Mr Murray said.

“I don’t exactly know why the price has dropped – it’s not from over supply or lack of demand.”

Mr Murray said while prices are down and sheep numbers are still low, there were still opportunities for new markets.

“The market is quiet strong despite the prices being down,” he said.

“We have Federal Trade and Agriculture Ministers who are keen to get the ducks all lined up for our industry.

“We are still working hard to open Saudi, and that remains a key point.

“Far east is keen to take sheep but there is work to be done around ESCAS requirements, and working towards the protocols.

“At the end of the day sheep numbers will be our biggest problem, but we have a great opportunity with a Federal Minister who is very keen, so we need to stay focused on that.

“DAPWA Livestock Industries executive director Peter McTaffe said building the productivity of the sheep flock still remained an important goal, with the latest preliminary estimates from ABS indicating numbers continue to drift in a range from 14 to 15 million head.

“Mr McTaffe said increased overseas demand for sheep meat was expected to continue into the future and this was giving industry confidence to invest.

“The stand-out growth was in lamb exports, valued at $200 million in 2013-14, an increase of 78 per cent from the previous year,” he said.

“But confidence in demand is just one aspect.

“There also needs to be confidence in supply and this starts on farm.”

While the latest DAFWA figures indicate that sheep numbers have levelled out in the last year, Beef Industry Leadership Council (SILC) chair Rob Egerton-Warburton said it was important that the sheep industry grew to meet the demand from markets.

“This will require both on-farm and supply chain improvements,” Mr Egerton-Warburton said.

“SILC works closely with both producers and the whole supply chain with its strategies.

“SILC have been focusing on upskilling on-farm with the push to have more sheep producers accredited in LTEM and other initiatives through the More Sheep program, as well as the More Sheep program recruiting and training staff, starting with a traineeship program.

“Other programs in the supply chain are underway with forward contract options and new products for new markets as part of the yearling supply chain.

“The market is providing the pull and it is time producers upskilled to meet the market.”

Thinking seriously about your agricultural marketing?

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Focused on innovative solutions for rural WA
A swing back to Merinos

By CLARE KING

The push and pull of the crop and sheep ratio is always a subject for speculation and analysis across WA farms.

While most farmers are currently eyeing off any spare dirt for its potential to whack a crop in, it is worth continually looking at the data feedback and keeping the options open.

Long-term forecasts aside, it seems the State will continue to be in the grips of a cropping frenzy for a while yet, but the crystal ball is still giving no clear messages in terms of how long this will last.

One message is very clear however and that is continually benchmarking your operation and getting optimal production out of the land that you have is key.

Farm management consultant Edward Riggall runs producer groups Statewide where they are constantly analysing data on both an individual and group basis.

Mr Riggall said the balance of sheep to crop ratio is constantly evolving.

“Farmers push out with crop and stock to find the limits that suit their environment, management style and attitude to risk,” he said.

“It is very much something determined on an individual basis.

“Producers are in tune with their business and systems of farming and the more their management skills and knowledge increase the more they have an understanding of their boundaries and limitations.”

Some observations which Mr Riggall has gained from the producer groups is that while many had pushed out their cropping area to capitalise on the commodity prices, some have now settled back to a more sustainable level and stocking rates have also come back.

Looking specifically at the figures and information collated from last year’s gross margins, sheep were approximately $25 a dry sheep equivalent (DSE). At 10 DSE that equates to $250/hectare.

Benchmarking observations also indicated that generally in lower rainfall areas, most producers ran lower stocking rates than optimal for their environment.

“This was very much a risk management situation for producers because if the season went against them they ran the risk of being overstocked,” Mr Riggall said.

“As a result their gross margins were generally higher per DSE which was estimated at being about $30/DSE which when stock at four DSE was about $120/ha.

“I estimate with higher wool and meat prices going forward the gross margin could expand from $30 to $35/DSE and $40 or more for lower rainfall areas.”

While sheep in general present one set of data, the swing of preference towards terminals or Merinos presents quite another field for analysis.

Across his producer groups, Mr Riggall has noticed a definite swing back towards a predominantly Merino operation over the past two to three years.

“I think some producers were looking to simplify the sheep side of their operation and they were basically getting tired of the complexities of prime lambs,” he said.

“Around this time we saw a pretty dramatic jump in the average price and the number of Merino rams sold but of course the drop in meat price was also a major contributor.

“However I think as prices have responded the percentage mated back to terminals has increased again.

“Terminals are a great tool especially if lambing percentages are high and you have a self-replacing flock.”

When it comes to the profitability and performance of sticking to a straight Merino flock, something Mr Riggall has observed from benchmarking data collected, producers must be very careful of significantly reducing wool cut.

“If you are going to sacrifice wool cut to improve lambing production, Mr Riggall believes farmers need to make sure they get their flock’s reproduction spot on, with no room for error at conception, mid pregnancy and lambing.

“While the easy care type of sheep are less management sensitive it is still crucial to maintain nutrition and optimal condition.

“If you drop the ball it is very hard to make money out of sheep with low lamb numbers per hectare and low wool cut per hectare.

“Wool is at least driving $50c of sheep income, and it is also a very forgiving product,” he said.

“If a ewe doesn’t get in lamb, it still grows wool; if it loses a lamb mid pregnancy it still grows wool, if its lamb perishes it is still growing wool, or if it’s getting over fed then it goes through to the wool.

“In this way it’s a wonderful product that catches all extra energy that’s not required for the lamb.”

Given that sheep still clearly have that capacity to be a highly profitable enterprise in conjunction with crop, a common reason why people go out of sheep or reduce numbers is that they are a lot of work.

Making the running and management of sheep easier has spawned a lot of research and investment in recent times.

Mr Riggall co-ordinates The Sheep Back Sheep Easy Field Day and said there has been a significant increase in the investment of technology and better equipment in order to achieve this.

“I think that many farmers who were looking at the direction their business was taking (how much crop versus how many sheep) have realised that they are in sheep for the long term so they had better get the yards and shearing shed into shape as they are the ones who are going to have to work in it,” he said.

“Subsequently there has definitively been an increase in the investment in the livestock area with many upgrading yards and ensuring that various pieces of handling equipment are able to slot into the system.

“Days like Sheep Easy enable people see what’s out there and the fact there is a huge range of tools, whether it be machinery, implementing the use of electronic identification or simple streamlining systems – there is something for everyone.

“With reasonable scale, most pieces of equipment are costing the equivalent of modern drench per head.”

This year’s Sheep Easy Field Day will be held on August 31 at Katanning. See www.sheepsback.com.au for more information.
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LAST time he checked, Stephen Sprigg had some of the happiest sheep in WA.

And rest assured, the Mukinbudin farmer checks his sheep constantly, making sure they are well looked after with plenty of food, water and a helping hand if it’s needed.

While he stops short of naming each and every one of his 2000 Merino breeding ewes, Stephen and his wife Ruth treat every animal on their property as part of the family, such is their high regard for their livestock.

It’s that tender loving care for their sheep that differentiates the Sprigg family from other sheep producers and it’s a story that is rarely told further afield, particularly to the end consumer of Merino wool products.

Which got Stephen thinking.

How do we differentiate Australian wool from other countries and open more overseas markets? How do we change common misconceptions other nations hold about Australian sheep and the methods we use to produce wool?

But perhaps most importantly, how do we get them to demand and buy more Australian wool?

The answer came to Stephen in two ways – firstly, he decided the best person to drive this push into overseas markets was himself, and secondly he shifted his focus from trying to sell wool to selling the story behind the wool.

That story has now culminated in the development of the Happy Sheeps concept and brand, an ambitious project undertaken by a humble farmer who believes things can be done a better way.

“We initially set out to promote wool as an exclusive and unique natural fibre,” Stephen said.

“But in addition to that, we wanted to promote the fact that Australian sheep are produced with the highest welfare standards possible.

“Somewhere along the way we have inadvertently created this negative perception to overseas buyers that we treat our sheep badly with practices such as mulesing.

“We need to turn that around and one of the ways of doing that is to tell the story behind our wool.

“We need to try and change these misconceptions, because unfortunately our ignorance of this issue has had negative market complications for a long time now.

“Aussies know they are world leaders at producing the best natural fibre in the world, but a lot of consumers don’t want to touch it, and therein lies the problem.”

The Happy Sheep project essentially encompasses the Sprigg family’s entire philosophy surrounding sheep production, from the very beginning with a successful lambing, no mulesing, employing low-stress stock handling techniques and plenty of freedom.

Stephen describes it as pro-
ducing uncomplicated sheep that are able to wander freely and graze freely on their 16,000 hectare farm, based on the idea that the farmer is the protector of the flock, not the predator. All of this contributes to the Sprigg family growing ethically produced wool, the product that takes centre stage of the Happy Sheeps’ story.

At his own expense, Stephen specially selected certain lines of their wool to be sent to Melbourne and scoured, producing one tonne of their clean 19 micron wool to be sent to the Natural Fibre Company in Cornwall, United Kingdom. Only a couple of weeks ago, the first lot was spun into yarn and sent to Scotland to be turned into an exclusive Happy Sheeps line of hats and beanies, all embossed with the newly designed logo and sold with the Happy Sheeps’ story attached.

It’s an exciting time for Stephen, who is feeling positive about the project but remains adamant the concept is still in the trial and development stage, testing the market to gauge the consumer’s response and their requirements.

Essentially, he believes the longer he can hold onto control over his product, the higher up the supply chain he moves and the bigger the rewards.

“As farmers, we’re always price takers and have little control over what our product is actually worth,” he said.

“But Happy Sheeps is a way to move up the supply chain, which is where you want to be because the longer we can hold onto ownership of our product, the more rewarding it is.”

“Consumers are much savvier about animal welfare and we need to clearly convey our ethical farming practices and the story we present to them.”

The Spriggs sheep production is very similar to other WA sheep farmers, joining the rams with the ewes on January 19 for a five-week period and making sure the ewes are on a rising nutritional plane in the lead up to lambing.

They spend a lot of time and effort lambing in July to ensure lamb survival rates are the best possible, as it relates back to the welfare of the sheep and their genuine ambition to raise Happy Sheeps.

As they don’t mules their lambs, the Spriggs shear every six months in April and October when the sheep have grown a 70-75mm staple, which is still a very marketable product.

“Two shearings just adds to the management benefits,” Stephen said.

“One is eight weeks before lambing and one is eight weeks before joining, so it’s before the important times and the best way to do it.

“It also means we have no problems with flystrike.”

Their absolute faith in the wool industry and the benefits of a natural, ethically produced fibre has continued to spur the Spriggs forward in their quest to open more overseas markets and lift the reputation of Australian wool.

Taking matters in their own hands hasn’t been without its challenges but Stephen is so passionate about improving market relations, not only for them but all wool producers in the future, he believes it is well worth the effort.

“Boom and bust times with commodities such as wool is nothing new,” he said.

“The only difference with this 30-year decline, in terms of trade, is it’s the longest downturn in history.

“I believe the wool industry is in crisis because it hasn’t changed in that time, it’s not moved up or down the supply chain in decades.

“That’s why we have taken matters into our own hands and tried to move up the supply chain.

“At the moment, we are finding so many people support what we are trying to do with Happy Sheeps and become involved, so it can only be a positive thing.”

Some of the Sprigg family’s ethically produced wool, shorn twice a year in April and October.

Animal welfare is of the utmost importance to Mukinbudin sheep producer Stephen Sprigg, who has decided to market his own Merino wool in the UK under his Happy Sheeps label, which will be sold complete with the story behind their ethically produced wool.
A GROUP of Harvey students set a new tradition for WA agricultural colleges when they competed at the National Merino Challenge (NMC) in South Australia in May.

It was the first time WA had been represented as a team although two of the college’s students competed as individuals at the inaugural event held at Dubbo, New South Wales, in 2013.

The NMC is an Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) initiative that allows young people to engage with the Merino industry by developing their knowledge, skills and networks.

It involves presentations and demonstrations from industry professionals as well as participating in seven mini-challenges over two days to test their knowledge of Merino wool, production, breeding and selection.

This year students Stuart Richardson, Pinjarra, Sammy Adams, Boddington, Rachel Scott, Perth and Bonnie Rodwell, Harvey, made the trip with two of the college’s trainers to compete in the Secondary School Division.

Year 11 student Sammy was the only Western Australian on the winner’s podium after she picked up a prize money to pay for a trip to Adelaide, although they were not winning ribbons.

He said Harvey’s students had a good record in the Woolorama wool, Merino and meat sheep judging.

“A key part of the NMC is the challenge, as well as providing students with materials they can use to get ready for the NMC,” Mr Gelmi said.

“National Merino Challenge project co-ordinator Ben Watts came to WA prior to the Make Smoking History Woolorama for a joint workshop held at the WA College of Agriculture, Narrogin, (which initially had plans to send students to the Challenge) and Harvey’s assistant farm manager Bronwen Fowler and sheep training officer Scott Robinson were among the trainers who attended.

“Now that we have the trainers in place we intend to field a team every year for the NMC,” he said.

“With 140 Year 10-Year 12 students at Harvey, vocational education training co-ordinator Peter Gelmi said keen student interest in the competition reflected a renewed enthusiasm for agricultural learning and the increasing number of career options that were opening up for those who wanted to continue with tertiary study.

He said the Challenge opened up new opportunities for students and it was the college’s intention to send a team to the Challenge annually as it was an excellent forum for students to build knowledge and contacts.

The 2016 NMC will be held in Melbourne and the college is planning to extend the students’ itinerary to include visits to a woolen mill and a shearer.

“Many of our students do not come from a farming background and those who are interested in judging pick it up quickly,” he said.

“They are like a blank canvas and absorb what they have been taught - they just need the right information.”

He said Harvey’s students had a good record in the Woolorama wool, Merino and meat sheep junior judging competitions and at this year’s event eight students finished highly in the sheep and wool judging.

“It was suggested they pool their prizemoney to pay for a team to go across to Adelaide,” Mr Gelmi said.

“It also required a fundraising effort and we thank the Stud Merino Breeders’ Association of WA for their help in this area.”

Each of the four team members has a career in agriculture mapped out with Stuart studying a Certificate III in Agriculture specialising in sheep; Rachel, Year 11, planning to study animal science at Murdoch University; and Bonnie, Year 12, hoping to undertake an equine career.

Mr Crosby is WA’s only representative on the AWI organising committee and said the Challenge had demonstrated there was more to the Merino industry than showing stud sheep.

“It is not just shearing, wool or meat but a combination of all these elements and as we fine-tune the event we hope other college’s will join in,” he said.

He applauded Harvey’s involvement saying its proactive approach to student learning across a diverse section of agricultural streams had made it the State’s leading agricultural college.

With 140 Year 10-Year 12 students the college is one of the biggest in WA and although it is not in a traditional sheep area it offered educational opportunities in wool and prime lamb production.

It also offered horticulture, dairy, beef and equine and runs a course to turn out young workplace-ready shearers.

The college also has its own small Morrington Hill Merino stud and while it has a breeding program in place it doesn’t sell rams but instead focuses on production and show preparation.

Mr Gelmi said students learnt how to prepare sheep for the IGA Perth Royal Show and although they were not winning ribbons it was a chance to meet other stud breeders, gain knowledge and contacts within the industry which often led to opportunities for students to work on studs and gain practical experience in different facets of sheep husbandry.

With an increasing number of students showing a special interest in sheep the Harvey college was planning to expand its sheep enterprises.

Mr Gelmi said all WA agricultural colleges were experiencing record enrolments and this year more than 600 students were studying agricultural courses in colleges across the State.

He said it was due in part to the end of the mining boom and people were looking at alternative employment.

“There are a lot of jobs in the agricultural industry and there is not enough graduates to fill positions,” he said.

He said Murruk re-opening had also been a factor and would attract more people with its agricultural business management degree available for students.

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No hiding this sheep passion

By LYNETTE CAREW-REID

It is easy to find Warwick and Nikki Armstrong’s property on the Albany Highway, or just look for the big West Coast Eagles signage near the Cradbrook gateway. Now, that is passion and they are equally passionate about Merino sheep and wool.

While it is a great time to be involved with both, there have been some years when others would have been questioning their commitment to wool. Not Warwick.

The year he came home to the family farm Terlingua was the year after the wool price crash but the foundations of an agricultural future had been set. The Armstrong family farms 1540 hectares of owned and leased land and life was already pretty tough before the wool crash.

Warwick’s father Tony ran a trucking business and leased the farm out for 11 years stipulating Warwick needed to have a qualification before he could go farming.

He duly complied studying a full-time TAFE course for a professional woolclassers certificate and gaining a Certificate III in Agriculture at the same time.

But even then fresh from study he had to work his way from shedhand to presser and occasionally shearer before he earned his position as professional classer in a contract team.

When Warwick and Nikki eventually settled on the farm the struggle was far from over as the farm he didn’t seek to change what was universally accepted.

When the message of soft rolling skins was expounded he purchased more nourished skins and a complete change of type. The Peppin-style sheep, with an acceptable 19 micron wool, were typical of many flocks at the times with flat crimp and blocky tips and during his early years on the farm he didn’t seek to change what was universally accepted.

When the message of soft rolling skins was expounded he pursued more nourished skins and a complete change of type. The flock was classed into many small mobs dividing the sheep into frame and wool types and included the nucleus of a stud flock they planned to call Woolonga after his father’s WWI settlement farm.

Already a keen sheep man using home bred rams it was a turnaround from what he was taught as a woolclasser but with in the flock he found the basics were there and he altered his breeding direction.

They settled at Wallinar stud to source rams and employed Jeff Brown to class their flock and made the decision to keep their unregistered stud nucleus.

Their concerted effort to change the flock saw them buy some high price Wallinar sires in an effort to increase clean fleece weight and improve wool quality.

At one point they were joining ewes with inferior wool to terminal sires but have recently dropped them out of the system with Warwick saying with the current wool price it is possible to make as much money running one-year-old wethers with a 3kg wool cut as he can from running a crossbred lamb.

Winter shearing and spring lambing has enabled Warwick and Nikki Armstrong to increase lambing percentage on their Cranbrook property.

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After studying a professional woolclassers course Warwick Armstrong has found continual learning has been a key to success as a wool producer. He is with some of the farm’s nucleus breeding flock.

Continued on page 34
EVERY EWE, EVERY YEAR

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ZOETIS, THE MAKERS OF GLANVAC, HAVE BEEN SUPPORTING LOCAL SHEEP PRODUCERS FOR OVER 60 YEARS WITH A COMPREHENSIVE RANGE OF QUALITY SHEEP HEALTH PRODUCTS
There is such a humble nature surrounding Charlie and Chris Flintham. If the father and son team are to be believed, they owe all their Merino breeding success to everyone but themselves, and they most definitely don’t think they are worthy of any credit.

But one look at their magnificent Merino flock and it’s immediately clear there has been many years of carefully considered selection, breeding, time and effort poured into them, reflecting the Flintham family’s passion for the breed.

Chatting to Charlie and his son Chris at their 3200 hectare Muntadgin farm, near Merredin, there’s a sense of quiet pride as they talk about their sheep, particularly when we check over this season’s lambs.

“They are looking pretty good this year, despite a bit of a dry spell,” Charlie said.

“But we probably feed them a bit more than we should.

“Someone once told me sheep are 25 per cent breeding, 75 per cent feeding and we have always fed our sheep plenty.

“It’s rewarding to see them come up nicely, but at the end of the day we are only as good as the bloke that can sell them.”

Charlie and Chris are referring to their long-time Elders agent and nearby neighbour Graeme Teasdale, who has also joined us to check out the progress of their lambs.

Mr Teasdale is quick to correct this statement, reiterating that the Flintham family put all the hard work in from their end to ensure he always has a consistent top quality product to sell to a market eager for wool and meat.

The Flinthams run a total of 1800 Merino breeding ewes which has been based on local Bruce Rock stud Belk Valley bloodlines for the last 10 years, enabling them to soften their wool clip and breed a true dual-purpose sheep.

While they enjoy the flexibility of the two market options Merinos provide, Charlie said growing meat has always been secondary to their wool production.

When choosing their breeding stock, Charlie and Chris prefer to stay in the middle of the road, selecting medium to large-framed animals with plenty of long-stapled wool.

“They have taken the same approach to maintain their wool clip at the 20 micron mark for many years, holding steady throughout many market fluctuations.

“We don’t like to muck around with the micron too much,” Chris said.

“We are always going to be wool producers because we think there will always be a place for it.

“It’s the best natural fibre you can find and nothing else compares.”

Their breeding program had previously began on November 25, when the rams are closely inspected before they are joined with the ewes at 2.5 per cent until the beginning of January.

But this season, they brought the mating forward a week to start lambing from mid-April rather than their usual Anzac Day drop for better management and scheduling around their 1200ha seeding program.

The Flinthams have also made a more obvious change around their lambing practices, swapping their labour-intensive trail feeding for self-feeders in the paddock with a vitamin and mineral loose mix, in addition to extra lupins and hay.

In the three years they have been using the feeders, Chris said they have recorded a noticeable lift in their lambing percentage from about 75-80pc to 95pc.

He believes by providing extra nutrition in both the dry summer period and lambing, the feeders have reduced the number of shy feeders as well as mothers running after the ute and leaving their new lambs behind.

Less interruption during lambing has reduced the number of ewes and lambs being separated and the Flintham’s lamb survival rates have lifted significantly, despite being very well fed in the past.

“Before using the feeders, we thought we were doing well to get 80 per cent lambing,” Chris said.

“But we’ve found the self-
feeders to be much better, the ewes won’t run off and leave their lambs behind.

“We always used to make sure the sheep had plenty of feed, but it was taking up a lot of our time as well as disrupting them during the critical lambing period.

“Now we are even seeing more twins appearing and it has amazed us what effect one small management change can have.”

The Flintham father and son team said they did attempt to switch to three main shearings over a two-year period recently, but long wool on the ewes during lambing time and other management issues soon had them changing back to their usual January shearing.

Even though the figures worked out the eight-month shearing timeline was financially rewarding, Charlie said there were too many issues and clashes with their cropping program to continue with it.

On a farm where wool is king, it’s not surprising that the Flintham’s average wool cut (including lambs) is now about 6.8kg, with a staple length of 80-85mm on the mature flock before they are shorn.

An excellent shearing team, in addition to the occasional hand with jobs like mulesing in July from helpful neighbours, reinforces Charlie and Chris’ belief that producing top quality meat and wool is a team effort.

“If you are working with good people, you can really tell the difference,” Charlie said.

“It’s a passion, not just a job, and we are lucky to have found a shearing team that works that way.

“Sometimes we also work in with our neighbours when it comes to things like mulesing or crutching, which goes a long way.

“If you’ve got the industry around you, professionals supporting what you do, it makes everything so much easier.

“I think the sheep industry and Merinos will still be going strong into the future.

“The wool and meat combination is hard to beat, even though other breeds may phase in and out, the Merino will always be there.”
CHOOSING a ram good enough for his ewes depends on its credentials, according to Northam farmer Michael O’Neill.

Matchmaking sheep for genetic gain has turned technical and it’s producers like Michael who have wholeheartedly embraced the scientific measurement benchmark of Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs).

Michael’s belief in ASBVs is so strong that he’s completely turned his ram evaluation methods on its head, assessing quantifiable figures on paper before even laying eyes on the physical traits of the ram in question.

In doing so, he has also managed to turn traditional sheep assessment upside down, moving away from physical inspections to almost a purely figures-driven purchase.

He believes the gains he has made by scanning and selecting rams using ASBV figures to mate with his commercial Merino flock have been significant, particularly within the first few years of adopting the technology.

It’s not the first time technology has played an important role in Michael and Vicki’s farming enterprise, as they have already been part of LambPlan for more than 20 years with their Annaghdowns Suffolk and White Suffolk stud.

The O’Neill family have long been sheep producers in the Northam area and these days they run 1100 commercial Merino ewes, 600 of which are joined to Merino rams and 500 to Suffolk or White Suffolk rams.

It’s quite a high stocking rate for their 1060 hectare property, but ideally the O’Neills would love to increase their land size and sheep numbers even further, a feat easily achieved by the selection of the right genetic traits.

“Agriculture has always been slow to uptake new technologies,” Michael said.

“Cropping was keeping up and changing to adapt to new technologies and we felt sheep needed to be a part of that too.

“So we decided using a quantifiable measurement tool such as ASBVs was the way to go.

“We can’t speak highly enough of ASBVs and how they’ve helped our sheep operation.”

Michael started paying serious attention to ASBV figures 10 years ago and became so involved he started his own scanning business in 2007, sub-contracting to Tamesha Gardner’s Stocksmart muscle scanning services.

He said he witnessed such a change in their flock within a few short years that he wanted everyone to have the chance to experience the same genetic gains.

“Our sheep are much more economical,” he said.

“We have better muscled animals with more length and strength that can grow a full fleece of wool.

“Wool is the easiest thing to change, but establishing the right meat and fat content takes a lot longer.

“But we’ve reached the point now where those traits are genetically entrenched in them, so they do well even in the tight years.”

Their Merino flock has been so finely tuned that Michael and Vicki’s two sons, Thomas (20) and Callum (18) are both keen to continue farming using ASBVs and scanning as a very important breeding selection tool.

Both sons are enthusiastic sheepmen having been working in the sheep yards, together with their sister Samantha, their whole lives, learning about various traits and qualities needed to construct the most productive animal.

Thomas has even started pregnancy scanning, continuing the family’s commitment and conviction in the science of sheep measurement.

The O’Neills have been
selecting and purchasing their Merino rams from the Brett Jones, Hasting stud, Dowerin, for many years, and he has also wholeheartedly adopted ASBV technology to measure his stud rams.

Michael said they look at the figures on paper before physically inspecting the rams, assessing the line-up for positive growth, muscle and fat values which are essential for their breeding operation. The Merino rams are then joined with the ewes in mid-December, a whole month after the Suffolk and White Suffolk rams are put out for mating.

Both breeds are joined for about 12 weeks and are drafted out at the main shearing in late February, with the F1 lambs starting to drop in mid-April and the Merino lambs in mid-May.

One of the most noticeable differences was the lift in lambing percentages since selecting rams with favourable ASBV figures, improving by about 15-20 per cent to achieve 95pc survival rate per ewe at last year’s lambing. Michael believes that’s where their gains start to turn into profits, turning off the first draft of F1 lambs by the second week of August at 45kg liveweight to local processors.

Most of the F1 lambs are sold before summer and the Merino hoggets are run through until 12mo before they are sold to the best market available at the time.

By focusing primarily on meat characteristics, Michael admits their wool cut has dropped to 5.5kg, but he believes their significant increase in lambing percentages balance it out.

To maintain their wool weight at that level, the O’Neills continue to grow fleeces that average 21 micron, remaining mindful that if they lower their micron their wool cut will also drop.

“The wools we grow now though are far superior to what we were producing,” Michael said.

“We certainly don’t want to drop our micron any lower and lose more wool cut.

“I think wool is a very underrated fibre and there has already been so much improvement in the type of wool we produce here in WA.

“There’s so much scope for improvement, both for the Merino wool and meat characteristics.

“There’s challenges within the breed that can be improved and fortunately we have to technology and knowledge to do that now.”

RIGHT and ABOVE: Some of the O’Neill family’s Merino ewes with Merino lambs at foot.
The “have a go” spirit is alive and well in Great Southern Merino circles. And you don’t have to go much further than Raymond and Chloe Noonan’s Narrawong farm to find a textbook example of it. The young couple are diving head-first into their own mixed farming operation that’s heavily focused on quality Merino production.

Born and bred on farms in the region, Raymond and Chloe are going it alone by taking on some hectares in the Broomehill shire halfway between Kojonup and Katanning.

They’re third and fourth generation Merino producers so wool is in their blood.

Their baptism of fire took place in 2010 – when they committed to farm life by carrying out Raymond’s family’s succession plan as well as leasing some extra hectares.

The past five years have really been about building the business and getting ready to take the next step into full-time farming.

Despite their cropping program, the couple’s 1250 head self-replacing Merino ewe flock plus lambs and hoggets is the apple of their eye.

In the initial flock building stages, Raymond and Chloe took on some existing Merino stock from Raymond’s family’s business and bought some from Chloe’s parents Trevor and Dot Binckes, who farm west of Kojonup.

Now they’re focused on building their Warren’s Creek blood flock numbers each year. Stringent management practices and a proactive approach to production have allowed the sheep to flourish.

Lambing percentages have ranged from 96-106 per cent and lambing takes place between May and late June.

Lick feeders and a fairly generous helping of oaten hay ensure ewes stay in good condition throughout the year and all sheep are jetted at the end of spring once flies start to become a problem.

Ewes are pregnancy scanned and divided into small single and twin-bearing mobs.

“We’re wetting and drying at the moment – nothing gets a second chance,” Raymond said.

“We don’t run the ewes particularly hard given our location – we usually work on 8.5-9 DSE (dry sheep equivalent) per hectare.

“Shearing takes place in September and crutching in April.”

Raymond and Chloe’s passion for Merinos has given rise to some fairly serious breeding objectives.

Their predominantly horned rams are selected primarily on fleece traits and size.

They look for fertility in ewes first and foremost, followed by fleece weight, wool cut and frame size.

“It’s such a numbers’ game,” Raymond said.

“We’re not overly focused on producing superfine wool because of the financial margins.

However, the Noonans’ annual clip has achieved a 19.5 micron average and a greasy fleece weight of about 5.5 kilograms per head in the business’ five years of operation.

Raymond said even in such a traditional sheep growing area Merinos remained a solid investment and flock numbers have remained fairly steady.

Farms west of the Great Southern Highway were built on the sheep’s back and he said the future of the breed is bright, both on his farm and in the area.

“Merinos are tried and
Raymond said his main concern as a producer was the wool market and its reliance on key customers such as China.

“Raymond said his main concern as a producer was the wool market and its reliance on key customers such as China. “There are so many more options when it comes to the meat trade,” he said. “The main reason we chose to grow Merinos over a prime lamb production system is the fact they’re dual purpose and can provide two income streams – wool and meat. “Even in tough years here the Merino tends to stack up.”

Raymond and Chloe shop around to market their wool each year to increase cash flow and overall returns. They sell their flock reasonably heavily on a yearly basis because they have the ability to top up their numbers by buying from Chloe’s parents.

“They sell their ewes at 5.5 years-old so we’re culling about one-third, if not more this year,” Raymond said. “They’re the same bloodline so they’re all the same sheep. It has allowed us to keep the quality up and be able to substitute our numbers with some of their older ones.”

Raymond and Chloe have culled heavily on wool type and structure and have been able to make a point of keeping the standard of the flock high. They usually sold ewes at 6.5 years of age but from this year will start to sell them at 5.5 years. It will allow the couple to keep the age of their flock down while maintaining a high quality wool cut. While numbers on the farm tend to vary, wethers are usually carried through and sold as 1.5-year-old shippers, last year saw the cream of the crop sold as wether lambs via on-farm sales.

Cast for age ewes are sold in summer off stubbles and culled young ewes are sold in the spring alongside the shippers. “We tend to keep the numbers status quo by selling off the same number of sale sheep as the natural increase,” Raymond said. “Apart from the 2010 season we’ve had a pretty good run. “It’s hanging on at the moment but who knows what we’re in for. “It’s certainly not too late and we’re hoping for a bit more rain.”

Like many sheep producers in the area, Raymond said his crops aren’t too bad but the pastures have started to struggle, including the clover he sowed into some of his hay stubbles.
Woolmark gains new partner

The latest brand to gain Woolmark and Woolmark Blend certification is premium menswear label Rodd & Gunn.

With a heritage dating back to 1946, the label’s affiliation and relationship with wool resonates with the values and qualities upheld by the Woolmark brand.

Having an overarching focus on natural materials and a culture linked to the great outdoors, quality, stylish and functional apparel is top of the list for Rodd & Gunn.

So becoming a Woolmark licensee was a natural fit, according to Rodd & Gunn’s head of design, John Prikryl.

“The properties of wool are, quite simply, amazing,” Mr Prikryl said.

“You can design almost anything out of it.”

It’s not only wool’s natural properties which make it the premier ingredient in luxury apparel – wool also has a great story to tell and it’s this provenance which consumers crave when purchasing quality goods.

A fibre from the land, produced by the simple mix of fresh air, sunshine, grass and water, Australian wool is lovingly cultivated by generations of Australian woolgrowers, who nurture every step of the process to deliver one of the earth’s finest and most precious fibres.

From the high rainfall areas of Australia’s eastern seaboard to the drier pastoral areas of the west, Merino sheep have become an integral part of the iconic Australian landscape.

“Much like the food industry, consumers should have a thorough understanding of what they are buying so they can make informed decisions,” Mr Prikryl said.

“Our customers are very discerning, so we aren’t interested in polyester knitwear or acrylic coats prone to losing shape, fading and pilling. “Our focus is on garments that perform and we have a reliance on natural fibres with amazing properties.”

“I’m exceptionally excited to have become a Woolmark licensee and can’t wait to get the message out to more people.”

“The driving factor to become Woolmark accredited was to promote the benefits of wool and educate our customers that wool is one of nature’s greatest fibres and we’re proud of it.”

No other fibre has a quality assurance scheme on par with that of the Woolmark Brand.

In the 50 years since the iconic logo was created, it has been applied to more than five billion products worldwide, showcasing the extraordinary versatility and innate luxury of wool.

“Woolmark and Woolmark Blend certifications are met. The products are certifiable, with independent laboratories, the Woolmark stamp of approval too.”

Continued from page 26

It continues as a background enterprise with the extended benefit of providing all the farm’s nitrogen needs over the past 10 years.

Soul testing shows the build-up from spreading five cubic metres a hectare of chickens litter annually has lifted nitrogen levels “off the page” and they only keep check on phosphorus and potassium applications.

They are currently running 3000 Merino breeding ewes but with increasing organic carbon levels and microbial activity improving soil, Warwick is aiming to increase their ewe breeding numbers and says 7.5 ewes and lambs a hectare is an achievable target.

After a long-term close association Warwick is still devoted to his Merino sheep and respects wool as a good sustainable product.

Last year the ewes cut an average 5.7kg a head of 18.6 micron wool and they were rewarded with 1270 cents a kilogram for 20 bales on the auction floor.

The price exceeded estimates by a $1/kg but the most rewarding accolade was selling four of his own rams back to the Wallinar stud.

As much as Wallinar has influenced the flock over the years he is looking forward to trailling progeny by his first Wirunga Park ram.

Backed up by technical specifications and subject to stringent testing carried out by independent laboratories, the Woolmark, Woolmark Blend and Wool Blend brands and sub-brands are used to certify products in relation to fibre content, fitness for purpose and performance in wear and care to ensure consumers’ expectations are met.

Receiving Woolmark and Woolmark Blend certification for a range of products including knit, coats, jackets, suits and scarves, Rodd & Gunn remains committed to sourcing wool and educating our customers that wool is one of nature’s greatest fibres and we’re proud of it.

Having long-standing relationships with the world’s most famous textile mills including Reda and Vitale Barberis Canonico, Rodd & Gunn’s ethos is to create quality clothing to stand the test of time and now it has the Woolmark stamp of approval too.
DEAD FASTER.
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NEW 25 L PACK

Extinosad® Pour-On is the dead fast, dead easy way to control lice off-shears. Its unique knockdown chemistry makes it ideal for use in rotation programs, while its nil wool withholding period and minimal 21 day ESI gives you maximum management flexibility. Combined with its new low volume applicator, new off-shears dose table and new 6 month off-shears guarantee, Extinosad Pour-On is now dead faster, dead easier.

1. Note technical directions. 2. Terms and conditions apply. Visit extinosad.com.au or contact your local stockist.

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FIELD DAYS

**Williams / Kojonup**
Tuesday, August 18

**Wickepin / Narrogin**
Tuesday, August 18

**Broomehill / Gnowangerup**
Wednesday, August 19

**Rabobank WA Sheep Expo & Sale**
Thursday & Friday, August 20 & 21

**Dowerin GWN7 Machinery Field Days**
Wednesday & Thursday, August 26 & 27

**Esperance**
Friday, August 28

**Newdegate Machinery Field Days**
Wednesday & Thursday, September 2 & 3
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Astbury wether forecast fine

BY CAITLYN BURLING

FOR many years now, keeping wethers past one or even two years-old, hasn’t been considered feed-efficient or financially worthwhile.

But there is one farming family at Nomans Lake, between Harrismith and Wickepin, who beg to differ.

The Astburys have spent many years growing their wethers out to 3.5yo and making a mighty fine living out of it too, providing an insight into the successful way they wethers enjoyed just a few short decades ago.

It’s nothing out of the ordinary for Nathan Astbury and his parents Greg and Heidi, who are all passionate wool producers with a keen focus on producing as much of the natural fibre as possible before selling their sheep.

The Astburys like the simplicity of their system and believe wethers can be run harder than other sheep enterprises such as prime lambs, and still produce an excellent result.

“We’ve probably got the oldest wethers in the State,” Nathan said.

“But we are wool growers and that means we want to get the most wool possible.

“My dad has always been a wool man and I am too.

“We find running a wether for wool is easy and it works better because we’re not chasing prime lambs around or changing marks all the time.

“With wool, we’re passionate about it, we know what we’re looking at and are comfortable in what we are doing.

“I enjoy knowing we are producing a clean, green, renewable fibre in an ethical way.”

Between the two farms, the Astburys run a total of 2000 Merino breeders, 1400 Merino wethers and 400 dry ewes at Nathan’s part of the farm, which the family purchased two years ago.

The terrain of this property was best suited to wether production and provided the Astburys with the ideal environment to grow wethers out without having to monitor them too closely.

Running wethers until they reach 3.5yo is quite straight forward according to Nathan, who believes they are quicker and easier to offload in tight years than their core breeding stock, ensuring the Astburys always have a saleable product at hand.

In previous years, the Astburys would sell their oldest wethers straight off shears after the main shearing at the end of January, then turn them again and send- ing them straight to the export boats in August.

“The shippers love them, as long as they are in good condition,” Nathan said.

“We usually turn them off at 60-70kg liveweight and have got a few good fleeces off them by that stage.

“I guess it comes down to timing and management to make sure everything is working the way we want it to.

“Merino wool producers don’t confuse the system, it’s very straightforward for us.”

Once the ewes have been shorn at the end of January, the lambs are sent in on the first day of February for a 45-day joining, ensuring the ewes are covered for two cycles and conception rates are high.

The Astburys have used Billandi rams for almost 20 years, enjoying the benefits of low flystrike, worm resistance and soft, white and bright wool grown on a moderate-sized frame that the bloodline provides.

They have also been quietly scanning for wet and dry ewes in the same time period, allowing them to call the unproductive ewes from the mobs and maximise the use of their available feed in the lead up to lambing.

Lambs start to drop from the first day of July onto good pasture paddocks and, in recent years, Nathan said they have achieved an average of 40 per cent lambs at weaning time.

One of the fundamental elements of the Astbury’s sheep production was maintaining ewe condition in the lead up to joining and also lambing, aiming to keep them at a condition score of two or higher throughout the entire period.

“We know we have to keep our ewes in good condition to get good results,” he said.

“We don’t go over the top feeding them, mostly running them on stubbles through the summer months and a lupin and oat mix that we grow and make ourselves.

“Sometimes, in the tight years, we might let the sheep graze the barley crops to boost our feed supplies, which has worked quite well.

But after all is said and done, every act of sheep husbandry the Astburys carry out throughout the year all leads to the main event in January – shearing.

For a number of years, their main focus was cutting wool that measured in the superfine category, but as the market shifted its requirements to a more mid-range micron, so did the Astburys.

Their lambs are still averaging 16-17 micron after their first shearing in April, but their main flock now produces bright and white wool at 20-21 micron, as there is currently no premium paid for superfine wool.

Despite this, the 9mo lambs produce a first fleece of about 45-50mm and measures within the superfine micron range that still...
attracts plenty of interest from buyers.

At the same time as the family slightly increased their micron, they also started to select rams more for their wool weight and bulk in an attempt to increase the volume of wool their sheep are producing. While all this wool might sound like extra work to some, Nathan is adamant their sheep system is as easy-care as they come, with minimal maintenance required to grow one of the world’s best natural fibres.

“We will continue to stick with the wool market, we’re passionate about it and know what we are doing,” he said.

“It’s a system that works for us and we really do find it to be an easy-care system. Sheep work has never been a big deal for us.

“When you enjoy what you’re producing, it’s never going to feel like hard work.”
ON-PROPERTY FIELD DAY
Tuesday, August 18

ON-PROPERTY SALE
Friday, September 11

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LEWISDALE

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August 20 & 21
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Machinery Field Days
Wednesday & Thursday,
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