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“Wool industry gets clipped”

Australian woolgrowers are in a fight for their lives as they try to combat the boycott of Australian merino fibre by US fashion retailer Abercrombie and Fitch because of perceived inhumane industry practices. If that boycott is not enough bad news for woolgrowers, animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has just announced that it is in negotiations with other major US clothing retailers to ban Australian merino fibre. It would appear that hard times for Australian woolgrowers may be here to stay unless there is immediate action to counter PETA. Some even say that the billion dollar a year industry is about to be decimated with dire consequences for the entire Australian economy.

PETA's major point of contention is the practice of “mulesing” which woolgrowers have reluctantly engaged in for more than a century to counter flystrike by blowflies. Woolgrowers all agree that this necessary practice to ensure the sheep's survival in the Australian bush is distressing for the animal but, without an alternative, it is something that they all reluctantly undertake.

The RSPCA has also weighed into the debate saying that research into safe and humane alternatives is now the number one priority for the wool industry. The majority of industry research is conducted by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and it is to that body that woolgrowers are looking for answers to what some are saying is the greatest threat ever faced by the industry.

AWI is supported by Australian woolgrowers and taxpayers to the tune of more than \$60 million a year. \$21 million is expended annually by AWI just in the administration of the organisation and now woolgrowers are keen to see some sort of a return on their sizeable investment – specifically an alternative to mulesing. Research has been conducted for many years already. AWI states that an answer may still be three years or more away. This is too simply long. In three years time there may not be a viable wool industry.

It is interesting to note that AWI is planning to invest many millions dollars over the next five years on ways to improve the profitability of wool growing practices. This of course assumes that there will be a wool industry in existence in five years' time. AWGA members believe this money would be better spent addressing the very real and immediate threat to our industry that has been posed by PETA's actions and the reaction so far of one American retailer.

AWGA has one simple question for AWI – what is their plan to combat the actions of PETA, American clothing retailers and consumers perceptions of our industry practices?

It is no secret that PETA's next target is Europe where Australian merino fibre has long been the number one choice of the top fashion houses of Italy, France, Germany and England. One only has to look at the recent disappearance of kangaroo meat from English supermarkets and restaurants to understand what a formidable organisation PETA is.

If a “head in the sand” approach is taken by our industry leaders in the hope that PETA will just go away, then they will be sadly mistaken. PETA has carried out its initial threats highly effectively and with potentially devastating consequences for the entire Australian wool



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industry. Now is the time for real action and strong leadership. Is this forthcoming from AWI and Woolmark?

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