



31 October 2004

“AWGA seeks solution to Animal Rights Boycott not division”.

The Australian Wool Growers Association in recent days has been strongly criticised for attempting to divide the wool industry, through newspaper editorials, media releases and Letters to the Editor. As Chairman of this organisation, a national body representing directly woolgrowers at a grassroots level, I wish to state categorically that this is not the case.

Many of your wool growing readers, and I would suggest the majority, only learnt of the threat to Australian merino wool and the boycott being promoted by Animal Rights activists PETA in the past fortnight and in particular that the practice of mulesing was at the centre of their attention.

The Australian Wool Growers found itself in the same situation, and in the past fortnight has sought to inform woolgrowers of the threat to the industry and our markets and at the same time sought through private correspondence with industry officials exactly what measures were being undertaken to address this conflict.

AWGA would confirm that the arguments in favour of a unified national industry position are compelling and are based on the following considerations;

1. The principal significance of the Abercrombie & Fitch decision is in its symbolic and precedent power. It seems almost certain that others will follow suit, and what began as a trickle may become a cascade;
2. The Australian wool industry is not in a position to set terms in the American market. There are several alternative sources of wool supply and numerous alternative fabrics available to major retailers reliant on fickle consumer sentiment. We are particularly vulnerable on the issue of mulesing because it is an Australian industry standard practice but is not global industry practice;
3. North America is the world's richest market and of vital importance to Australian wool growers. As a result, we are rightly spending many millions of dollars attempting to enhance the attractions of Australian wool in that market;
4. PETA represents the largest single threat to the marketing of Australian wool in North America. PETA has been growing in strength for 25 years and now employs 100 staff at its headquarters in Virginia. Taking one simple competitive indicator as a starting point, PETA's web site runs rings around any Australian wool industry site for readability, interactivity, persuasive force and celebrity endorsement. In an era of urban prosperity, where people no longer necessarily follow an established spiritual regime, but still feel the need to believe in or demonstrate their social conscious, concern about animal rights/welfare provides an attractive, fashionable badge of moral conscience that will grow in mass appeal rather than diminish over the next decade;
5. Defending the practice of mulesing is an inherently difficult task. The story lends itself beautifully to tabloid television and the nuances of balanced veterinary opinion will be easily lost in the emotion of urban viewers (consumers) watching defenceless sheep have large chunks of their skin carved out of their bodies without pain relief, for



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profit;

The lack of progress to date in changing industry practice reflects not a lack of economic alternatives to mulesing but a lack of will to unsettle entrenched orthodoxy in the face of a real and growing external threat to our prosperity;

6. The responsibility for this industry division will rest solely with the current management of the self appointed "non-inclusive" industry taskforce, to which Australian Wool Innovation as the industry recipient of levy payer funds and tasked with the responsibility of seeking to improve the profitability of wool growing, is a major influence.

By the ongoing actions of AWI in excluding organisations such as the Australian Wool Growers Association from this important issue amongst others will only create further division.

AWGA sees the PETA question as merely one theatre of battle in a wider "hearts and minds" campaign to sell Australian wool to the world.

AWGA would prefer to deal with sincerely held differences of view in an adult, professional manner by dialogue and consensus building, based on respectful consideration of each other's views. None of us has perfect 20:20 vision on these complex and fast moving issues. AWGA has no desire to be a rogue organisation. Our sole interest is to achieve better, faster outcomes for Australian wool growers.

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