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Farmers wary over mulesing deadline

Daniel Lewis Regional Reporter Sydney Morning Herald

THE wool industry fears a backlash from retailers over concerns the pledge to end mulesing by 2010 will not be met.

Wool industry leaders insist alternatives to the controversial procedure will be available within three years, but others claim there is no hope of acceptable options in that time frame.

A meeting of the NSW Farmers Association executive council yesterday voted to support more research into a pain-killing post-mulesing spray, Tri-Solfen, as a fallback position in case mulesing alternatives prove unviable.

The association's president, Jock Laurie, said he was hearing growing farmer anxiety over workable 2010 alternatives.

Don Hamblin, the association's wool committee chairman, also acknowledged woolgrower "angst", but insisted the 2010 promise the wool industry made to retailers in 2004 was "immutable ... our retailers have no need to worry".

Since the 1930s Australian farmers have used mulesing to protect their sheep from flystrike caused by the introduced sheep blowfly. Mulesing is where the skin around a lamb's backside is cut off, without anaesthetic, so it develops a bald breech area. It stops the accumulation of faeces and urine in wool that creates a paradise for blowflies to lay their eggs. Flystrike occurs when the maggots hatch then burrow into the flesh of sheep.

In 2004 the US-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals had success getting some clothing businesses to boycott Australian wool until mulesing is ended.

Millions of dollars are being spent on research into alternatives by Australian Wool Innovation. They include plastic clips and injections that also produce bare breech areas, genetic research into sheep that have natural blowfly resistance and research into genetic and biological blowfly control.

Innovation's blowfly control project officer, Jules Dorrian, said plastic clips were the most advanced alternative, while genetic research offered a longer-term solution.

Mr Hamblin said the clips project was "progressing more slowly than we would have liked", with cost still an issue. Unless removed, the clips fall off after several weeks and there is also unease about paddocks being littered with thousands of clips.

A major commercial trial of the clips will be run later this year and work is being done on developing biodegradable clips.

The injectables project was going "OK", with hope it would be commercially available by mid-2009, Mr Hamblin said.



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Peter Carter, a farmer and veterinarian, has tried Tri-Solfen to great effect and moved the resolution at yesterday's meeting for more research.

"The pain stopped almost immediately," he said. "Instead of walking off and looking like they had been shot, [the lambs] walked off and started to eat."

Tri-Solfen was developed with the support of Chick Olsson, a Goulburn woolgrower and outspoken critic of the way the wool industry has handled mulesing.

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