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## WoolPoll Panel Set for Levy Debate

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AUSTRALIAN Wool Innovation (AWI) says it would be welcoming debate on the wool levy as attention begins to focus on November's WoolPoll.

The Australian Woolgrowers Association (AWGA) made it clear at last week's Wagin Woolorama that it would be pushing the case for a levy reduction this year.

AWGA's acting chairman Shane Edwards raised the grower group's position at an open forum held at the Woolorama with AWI chief executive officer Stuart McCullough and directors David Webster and Wal Merriman. The group is pushing for a reduction in the wool levy from the current two per cent to 1.5pc saying increased returns for wool in recent times had substantially boosted AWI's coffers.

AWGA has also appointed former AWI director Chick Olsson to be its representative on the WoolPoll panel "With experience and insight of AWI, as a retired director of the board, who better can grassroots growers have to represent their best interests in this year's November vote to establish the wool levy to be paid for the next three years," Mr Edwards said.

The Wool Poll panel will meet in Sydney for the first of four meetings on March 26.

In a statement released by AWGA Mr Edwards said growers did not want to see their hard-earned money being used for empire building.

"AWI is a not for profit company with about \$100 million in reserves," he said.

"With higher wool prices AWGA recommends 1.5pc as a sensible amount to maintain operations.

"A 1.5pc levy would still provide a modest increase in AWI's revenue. Any further reduction at this stage would be too much."

At the Woolorama forum, Mr Edwards said he believed even though there were five options for the levy amount, including zero, AWI was keen for the levy to remain the same.

WoolPoll chairman Will Roberts said in letter recently sent to AWGA, that it was not the role of individual panel members to recommend a particular levy rate or expenditure split.

"In order to maintain confidence of the wider industry in the independence of the WoolPoll Panel, I am committed to ensuring that we collectively perform the role and undertake our responsibilities as outlined in the WoolPoll regulations. WoolPoll is an important process for the industry and I expect all panel members to act with the same commitment to these roles.

"Panel members were appointed as representatives of their respective organisations, not as individuals. So in fulfilling their roles, 2012 panel members are asked to liaise closely with their membership bases and woolgrowers in respective states, to ensure a broad range of interests are accounted for in the panel's discussion on the 2012 poll."

The panel is due to meet on March 26, 2012 and in the letter Mr Roberts states that he has asked AWI to provide a full briefing on the panel's role, responsibilities and poll process.

In the letter Mr Roberts says the panel would be asked to "endorse the levy rate options recommended by the AWI Board".

AWI chairman Wal Merriman told Mr Edwards at Wagin that AWI appointed the chairman of the WoolPoll panel and the chairman then appoints the panel.

He said the panel acted independently to AWI and presented its recommendations to the board.

"This panel has only just being appointed and it hasn't met yet but when it does it will assess all levy options," Mr Merriman said.

"There will also be an expanded Industry Consultative Committee meeting which will also take in all industry perspectives, so there will be plenty of opportunity for debate over the levy split and plenty of opportunity for all industry viewpoints to be put forward."

AWI director David Webster also said the board was happy for debate on levy amounts to go ahead.

"The board is not going to do anything to stifle the debate," Mr Webster said.

AWGA acting chairman Shane Edwards said growers did not want to see their hard-earned money being used for empire building.



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