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The End Of The Sheep's Back



ELLA RUBELI/THE GLOBAL MAIL

Australian sheep farms are leading a race to end mulesing.

PETA's anti-mulesing campaign has produced million dollars of research, an album of music titled 'We Love Sheep' and a decade of protests — is an alternative to the brutal procedure finally near?

Christmas in Manhattan holds traumatic memories for Australia's woolgrowers, because it was there, eight years ago, that the politics of the sheep's bum came in from the fringe. That was when the nearly 100,000 New Yorkers thronging Ninth Avenue en route to Lincoln Tunnel, Penn Station or Madison Square Gardens could lift their eyes [to a billboard depicting two gory wounds on a sheep's breech](#) and read: "Did your sweater cause a bloody butt? Boycott Australian Wool!"

The woolly jumper is a holiday-gift staple in the northern hemisphere and according to Erik Autor, the American National Retail Federation vice-president, fine-gauge wool occupies a special, irreplaceable niche for stores selling sweaters, skirts and suits to fashion-oriented buyers. And so, some 57,000 growers earn Australia \$2.7 billion a year.

But this 2004 campaign, launched by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), was about to cost an estimated \$100 million a year in lost sales for woolgrowers like Chick Olsson.

At the time the Manhattan billboard sprang up, Olsson was running a flock of Merinos on the 2,000-hectare Royal Oak property his grandfather, Norman, bought 60 years ago in



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New South Wales. It is a land of straw-coloured hills studded with gums, with a 150-year-old, pole-and-tin shearing shed smelling of lanolin from top-grade fleece.

However, each spring, into this romantic, pastoral scene, a discordant note would enter: farmworkers looking like axe murderers — their faces, hair and clothes caked and splattered in vivid red as their patients [reeled away from the cradle where their legs had been clamped](#) for a 30-second operation.

“You just do it,” Olsson says of the procedure, and its place in farming life. “You think: ‘I have to get through this day and a couple of thousand lambs and then move on to fencing, to tussock spraying, or something else.’”

What he was doing to his sheep — what nearly every Australian sheep farmer also did — prompted the outraged billboard. He was mulesing. That is, cutting away the rear flaps encased in the wrinkly rear folds that are the trademark of a fine-wool Merino.

Olsson and his fellow woolgrowers saw it as the best way to stop their sheep from facing an agonising death from a maggot attack. Animal rights activists saw it as mutilation.



ELLA RUBELI/THE GLOBAL MAIL

Australian grazier Chick Olsson holding freshly shorn Merino fleece, the world's best.

THIS DISAGREEMENT HAS PITTED PRINCE CHARLES AGAINST PINK, the pop star. It has disconcerted luxury shoppers with an eye on the Milan catwalks. It has prompted spending in the tens of millions and scientific breakthroughs in pain relief. It has caused pain and transformation — of people as well as animals.

And, after a kind of a truce since that billboard appeared, the politics of the sheep's bum are coming to the fore again.

Mark Pearson, the executive director of Animal Liberation NSW, who inspired PETA to begin its worldwide campaign eight years ago when he sent hideous footage of mulesing to its president Ingrid Newkirk, is about to press for a new deadline for the practice to end.

“We are saying 1 January 2014 is the date when mulesing should not happen,” he says.

So it is that suit-makers are now deal-breakers.

Already the high-end Italian fashion house Zegna, with 560 stores in more than 80 markets, will allow into the competition for its prestigious Wool Trophy — awarded to the best superfine Merino fleece — only entries of wool shorn from non-mulesed sheep.

“Everyone looks up to Zegna. It's got the royal blood in it,” says Pearson. He means Count Paolo Zegna, the company chairman and grandson of the founder, Ermenegildo. “They, in a



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sense, lead the world. They give trophies to woolgrowers. We will pitch it to Zegna to lead the way so that they have no woolgrower mulesing by 1 January, 2014.”

That would be nearly a decade after the New York billboard crisis, when Ian McLachlan, the conservative who was then chairman of the woolgrowers’ peak body, Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), had a writ served on Newkirk as she appeared on Australian TV. It alleged breaches of the Trade Practices Act.

When AWI sued PETA, the world’s largest animal rights organisation and some of its fellow activists, Olsson was disgusted. He went to New York with like-minded woolgrowers and scientists for exploratory talks with PETA leaders.

“We had three days with them. We all learnt something from each other. We learnt about compassion and they learnt about genuineness in farming,” he says. Olsson had a change of heart about the inescapable need to mules Merinos. He was not alone.

Even in the month before the billboard went up, PETA’s pressure had led some 20 woolgrower bodies to pledge mulesing would be phased out by the end of 2010. AWI repeated the undertaking as part of a deal with PETA — bringing an end to its costly court case.

Olsson has since joined the multimillion-dollar quest for ways to end mulesing and to make it gentler on the sheep while it continues as a humane practice. He says he has now stopped mulesing for most — possibly eight in 10 — of his 3,000 Merino ewes.

The wool world has shifted on its axis, moving to alleviate sheep suffering through pain relief and genetics. But it has not moved fast enough for the activists.

THE SEEMINGLY TERRIBLE CHOICE about mulesing — to do or not to do — arises due to a meeting between two immigrants to Australia — the Merino sheep and the *Lucilia cuprina* fly.

Merinos were brought to Australia not long after the country was colonised by the British, and the first bale of wool was sent to England in 1807. The distinctive folds over the Merino body have delivered high fleece yields to farmers.

“It [the Merino] is bred to be one of the most drought-tolerant creatures known to mankind,” Olsson says. “It can survive on the most minimal grass and as the grass quality gets worse, the wool gets better ... It becomes finer and more beautiful. It’s like a miracle.

“My grandfather believed it was a gift from God,” Olsson says.

The fly considers the classic wrinkly Merino posterior, or breech — rich with the scent of urine or faeces — to be both a fine dining plate and a perfect nest in which to lay its eggs. As the eggs hatch, the larvae, which have teeth, virtually eat the sheep alive. This is flystrike.

“It’s a horrible thing, flystrike... I’ve seen sheep that their entire back looks like someone’s taken to it with a blowtorch. The whole top has just fallen off,” says Sydney University veterinary physiologist Dr Peter White.

To avoid that, farmers have traditionally cut off the breech.

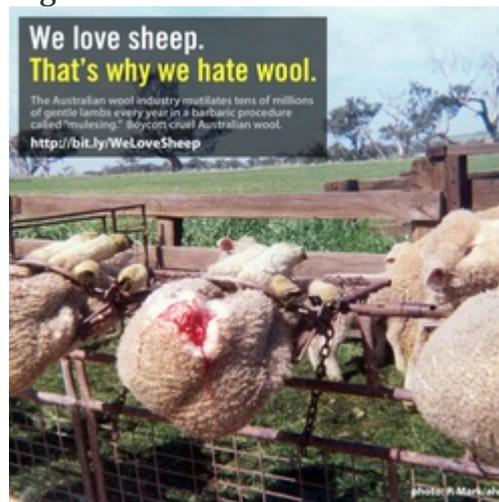
Trying to overturn this wrinkle in history has been costly: between 2005 and 2011, AWI spent \$26 million on research into how to tackle breech flystrike.

And there has been notable improvement. According to the Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX), annual production from non-mulesed animals rose by 15 per cent in 2009-10, then by 40 per cent in 2010-11.

Eastern Australia's decade-long drought helped, because there were fewer flies to attack unmulesed sheep.

But Nathan Selmes, Olsson's farm manager, who shears all over Australia, says that many who stopped mulesing regretted it because last year they lost so many sheep to flystrike. "A lot who stopped mulesing three to four years ago turned around and mulesed this year's lambs," he says.

"Wet, hot summers promote fly population growth — and that is when a lot of farmers see the need for mulesing to come back, with increased flystrike in their flock," says Dr Sabrina Lomax, a Sydney University veterinary research associate who was involved in developing a pain relief product for mulesing.



PETA

A confronting image from PETA's anti-mulesing campaign.

Farmworkers looking like axe murderers — their faces, hair and clothes caked and splattered in vivid red as their patients reeled away from the cradle where their legs had been clamped for a 30-second operation.

More on pain relief later; industry bodies and government department alike have focussed mainly on genetics as the best long-term hope for resolving the mulesing problem.

The conundrum is how to breed out the wrinkle in the sheep's body while maintaining the beautiful crimp and "memory" (or elasticity) of the best fleece in the world.

Breeders want to maintain wool yield; they're also keen to ensure that changes to the breed still deliver good meat, as most Merinos ultimately end up on the dinner plate.

An added complication is that what works in one geographical area may not in another.

Olsson tried some plainer-bodied sheep which had very heavy wool when wet and did not suit the weather conditions on his farm near Goulburn.

Now he is phasing in a variety of "long-bodied" Merinos that he describes as having been "stretched out" through breeding, to make them larger and less wrinkly. These, mostly, do not need mulesing.

The "plain-bodied" variety that has a blessedly smooth butt with the wrinkle bred out is gradually infiltrating the national flock. But there are failures and throwbacks. It has been a long process.

Funding for dealing with the wrinklies has also included research on chemicals to zap the offending flies and on clips which hold the loose breech folds back, reducing the wool cover,

as an alternative to mulesing surgery. Some farmers already use dogs trained to sniff out fly-struck sheep, which is easy because of their putrid smell. The dogs then cut the affected sheep from the mob so they can be treated.

Now AWI-funded research is trialling the use of dogs whose noses can detect sheep with fleece that is resistant to flystrike — which could enable farmers to breed more naturally resistant flocks.

And great hope is now held for a treatment in which sodium lauryl sulphate, an ingredient common in toothpaste, is applied to the sheep's breech; the chemical reduces the wrinkle and also leaves the breech bare of wool, without the need for painful mulesing.

Still, those sheep that retain the classic rumped Merino breech must be mulesed for their own welfare, Olsson says. And this is why he invested in pain studies.



ELLA RUBELI/THE GLOBAL MAIL

Chick Olsson says the way sheep turn grass into fleece is “like a miracle”.

WITH FELLOW SHEEP GRAZIER Dr Meredith Sheil, a paediatric surgeon, Olsson funded research into the post-operative anaesthetic spray Tri-Solfen. Successful trials of the spray were conducted by a Sydney University research team, which includes Peter White and Sabrina Lomax. Then, the rights were sold to the chemical company Bayer (under a deal Olsson says he cannot disclose because of a confidentiality agreement). The company reports that 70 per cent of Australian woolgrowers used it on their animals this spring, administering it immediately after mulesing.

Now Olsson, 49, an unrestrained motormouth who aspires to a Liberal Senate seat, crusades for the use of pain relief for farm animals with a zeal similar to that of a reformed smoker.

“If I put my dog on a mulesing cradle and did that to the dog, I’d be in jail for 20 years. And fair enough, too,” he says.

Olsson, though, has some vested interest here. Although he says he receives no further payment from Bayer for the use of Tri-Solfen after mulesing, he does stand to gain from new research into pain relief for other practices, such as branding and dehorning cattle. Although it receives annual federal government funding of \$10 million to 12 million, the AWI prefers to remain aloof from media mulesing debates. Its chief executive, Stuart McCullough, was unavailable to talk to *The Global Mail*.



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AFTER THE 2004 LEGAL CASE was resolved, activism over mulesing receded and the focus has shifted. PETA's dress-up sheep's heads [were redeployed in cities all over the world](#) for street protests intended to highlight the live-export issue.

Then, in July 2009, [AWI ditched its deadline to stop mulesing](#) by 2010, saying to pursue it would risk "a serious deterioration in the welfare of sheep and/or a critical negative impact on the production and supply of wool".

"A lot who stopped mulesing three to four years ago turned around and mulesed this year's lambs."

PETA — which exists on donations and claims more than three million members and supporters worldwide, including 70,000 in Australia — preaches veganism and decries the use of animals for food and clothing. So it was not about to just lie down, lamb-like, on mulesing.

"We don't believe animals are there for human use at all," says PETA Australia campaigns co-ordinator Claire Fryer.

PETA urged protesters to saturate social and traditional media and to disrupt business at stores and company annual general meetings, by splattering fake blood around and holding up gruesome placards.

The organisation has provided *The Global Mail* with [a list of 54 fashion houses and retailers](#) that it claims now shun wool from mulesed sheep. These include Abercrombie & Fitch Co, Columbia Sportswear, Country Road, Finisterre, Laura Ashley, Marc Bouwer and Timberland. Another seven, including Gap and Hugo Boss, are phasing it out, PETA claims. The singer Pink says [in a video on PETA's website](#): "Sadly, like any industry that uses animals, the wool trade uses methods so sadistic that it makes you consider clearing your closet of any animal products." Pink was reported as [backing down from her anti-mulesing stance](#) five years ago when she learned more of the facts, but PETA has reiterated to *The Global Mail* its claim that she still condemns the practice.

Pink describes Merinos as "Frankenstein" sheep greedily bred to produce as much wool as possible, their massive folds so disabling that "they can't even crap".

Meanwhile, on behalf of his federation's 9,140 members, which include retailers from Macy's to Giorgio Armani Corporation, Autor has written several stiff warning letters to the divided Australian wool industry seeking adherence to a real deadline to end mulesing. It is a demand backed by the retail associations of Britain, Canada and Europe.

Autor confides that he had never imagined he would find himself on Australian farms inspecting the nether parts of sheep as he did in 2010.

"It was an interesting experience. It was the second time I had been to Australia. The first time, the only bottoms I had seen were on the beach," he says.

He has seen sheep suffering from flystrike.

"All in all, the issue is not a pretty one," he says.

Meanwhile Prince Charles, poster boy for wool as an eco-friendly fabric and patron for the Campaign for Wool, visited a Merino stud in Tasmania's southeast [in a grey pin-stripe double-breasted woollen suit](#) this past November. He has not shared his views on mulesing,

but he continues to support the industry. He threw a fleece, inquired how the handler stopped the kelpie sheepdogs from cocking their legs. He brought publicity of inestimable value to the image of Australian wool, AWI chief McCullough said at the time.



WILLIAM WEST/AFP/GETTY

Prince Charles at a Campaign for Wool event in Sydney, during his Australian tour in November 2012.

OLSSON APPLAUDS the marketing of wool as a natural, luxurious product, but he is part of a group of woolgrowers who lament that mulesing progress has been too slow.

“Put yourself in the position of a major fashion house that has got a very good brand, that has a very young, highly educated workforce of people who are incredible artists. Would they want to be associated in any way with perceived cruelty?” Olsson says.

Any of Olsson’s sheep that must be mulesed get post-operative pain relief. And Olsson now says that farmers who do not use it should be charged with cruelty.

“Because a lamb doesn’t make a noise, they think it doesn’t feel pain. But that’s just nonsense,” he says.

Activist Mark Pearson realised several years ago that this kind of change in the perception of animals’ pain could transform life on the farm.

He watched a video about mulesing alongside a 70-something, red-faced sheep farmer who said, as Pearson recalls, “They do feel pain, don’t they, the poor bastards?”

“I thought, ‘This is important, and [represents] an opportunity to change a mindset, one that causes a great deal of harm in animals,’” he says.

Pearson’s group, Animal Liberation, has similar aims but different methods to those of PETA. He fell out with the PETA head, Ingrid Newkirk, over the issue. Pearson told Newkirk it was worth supporting the use of pain relief for mulesing — because on big stations with tens of thousands of sheep, there could never be enough staff to check whether they were flystruck.

“She wouldn’t buy it ... She sent me an email saying: ‘I hope we are on the same page, Mark.’ I said: ‘No, I’m on the next page,’” he says.

THE BELIEF THAT ANIMALS ARE IMMUNE TO PAIN survives among some farmers, and even vets. Dr White says it is impossible to know exactly how much pain an animal experiences.

“We can only assume that they are in pain because they have all the same equipment that we have, that allows us to sense pain,” he says. “It is very difficult [to know] for something like a sheep or a cow. They are traditionally prey animals. If they look sick, they have a



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better chance of being eaten by a lion, or whatever, so they can be just about dead before they show any signs that they are actually ill or have an injury, or are in pain.



ELLA RUBELI/THE GLOBAL MAIL

Australian farms are perfect for growing Merinos, but for one pesky fly.

“It wasn’t really until the 1980s that they started teaching about pain in animals in veterinary schools. In the 1960s and ’70s, it wasn’t an issue.”

[Olsson’s farm manager Nathan] Selmes does not think young lambs feel pain: “When they’re, say, 10 weeks old, I reckon they run back to their mothers pretty well [after mulesing] and run around the paddocks,” he says.

Pearson believes otherwise: “The feeling I got when I saw it was like when you are kicked in the testicles. You don’t make much noise, but you pull in.”

PETA’s Fryer won’t say how she witnessed mulesing first-hand, but it was clear to her it caused sheep extreme stress.

“They don’t make a noise... but you can see they struggle. You can see from their reaction after they are released from the clamp, often moving sideways, walking away, hunched in their bodies and off their food,” she says.

Lomax says: “People who don’t have a scientific understanding of this stuff tend to anthropomorphise the animal to a state where they equate it to themselves. I can understand that, but it’s very important when you make statements like that to get all the facts.

“I think it’s pretty unfair to call farmers out on this and say there is no real reason for them to be doing this, because it’s a welfare procedure. It’s to promote the welfare of the animal and it’s a choice — make an acute procedure versus the chronic illness of flystrike.”

But any hope that the use of Tri-Solfen would appease PETA was dashed six months ago when the Australian director of its campaigns, Jason Baker, wrote to vets who had registered with Bayer to use it.

Because a lamb doesn’t make a noise, they think it doesn’t feel pain. But that’s just nonsense.”

He asked them to “only support flystrike-control methods that don’t involve surgical or clip mulesing”, citing CSIRO research that found “no analgesic drug, when used alone, was effective in controlling the pain and stress of mulesing”.



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Pearson says he, too, has expressed fresh concerns in meetings that the AWI regularly holds with animal welfare groups.

“I’ve made it clear I’m not happy with the numbers of growers that are not as proactively breeding out the wrinkles as they should be. A thinking has come in that, ‘We can use the pain relief and keep the higher density of wrinkles going so we get more clip,’” he says. Pearson applauds PETA’s anti-mulesing activism, which he says “keeps the sting going” for those in the wool industry. The retailers’ man, Autor, is less amused: “I just don’t get it, the Hollywood twits who are ready to sign up for any silly campaign. They [PETA] are very effective in recruiting Hollywood celebrities and young people and in using sex to push their message.

“They’ve got naked models painted up to look like caged animals, they’ve got the girls running around in lettuce-leaf bikinis — it’s weird,” he says.

But they are often effective.

In mid-2012, two PETA activists embarrassed Japan’s wealthiest man, Tadashi Yanai, at a Manila press conference by shouting and holding up signs alleging one of his companies, UNIQLO, was involved in sheep cruelty.

UNIQLO is a giant funky fashion chain for the young. A month earlier, a handful of PETA protestors had stood outside a UNIQLO London store in the rain waving images of a mutilated sheep’s bottom. The English singer Morrissey joined the cause, saying he was tempted to write a follow-up to his song *Meat is Murder*. He would call it [Mulesing is Misery](#), he said.



ELLA RUBELI/THE GLOBAL MAIL

Shorn Merinos wait to be sprayed to prevent flystrike.

UNIQLO caved in, and PETA announced the company [had committed to phasing out mulesed wool](#).

PETA’s executive vice president, Tracy Reiman, issued an “action alert” last year [urging activists to share images from a We Love Sheep album](#) with AWI’s promotional Facebook page, We Love Wool.

Here, again, was the bloody mulesed sheep’s bottom, designed to offset AWI’s campaign to sell wool through carefully constructed images of elegant mannequins in beautiful, supple, comfortable garments made from fleece supplied by Mother Nature herself.

The We Love Wool moderators appear to have fended off the attack, after PETA youth campaigner Rachelle Owen, who has “Vegan” tattooed on her arm, urged followers to “expose the truth behind the fluff”.



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AWI had to fight back with filters.

“I tried posting a picture on their page, but it wouldn’t let me,” one enthusiast replied.

The latest pledge PETA is asking followers to sign is to “Save My Booty”, [showing a cartoon lamb with a Band-Aid on its breech](#).

Fryer is adamant about what PETA wants: “You can produce an entire fly-resistant flock within two years with a breeding program. This could be done and dusted and would be ancient history if they had taken this path.”

Olsson responds with an analogy, which he admits is a terrible example.

“PETA has not understood the science. They’ve said: ‘You’ve got five years to change the whole flock over.’ It’s like saying if Usain Bolt made love to every Australian woman, within five years everyone could run 100 metres in nine seconds. It’s just not possible, even though on paper it might look good,” he says.

But unlike many woolgrowers, Olsson, belated convert to the animal welfare cause, has a kind word for PETA.

“The chaos of the PETA thing,” he says, “has led us to understand sheep in detail now.” And probably, too, the blowfly and the people whose political beliefs lead them to fight over one portion of a creature’s anatomy.

As Pearson says: “It’s a strange area to work in. There are a lot of complex animals in this area — especially on my side.”