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Ditch AWI: Massy

The Land

WOOLGROWERS would be better served by more smaller grower groups focused on innovative marketing rather than a blanket approach from a large statutory body like AWI, says stud breeder and author Charles Massy.

Mr Massy - who researched and wrote sell-out books *The Australian Merino* and *Breaking the Sheep's Back* - believed the Australian wool industry should be aggregating and marketing fibres based on specific traits that would deliver best performance to customers in processing, such as topmaking and spinning.

He said a second approach could be forming grower groups by region or sheep bloodlines, but only if it could deliver marketing benefits.

Mr Massy was key speaker at The Wool Forum in Hamilton, Victoria, last week, which debated future funding options for the wool industry.

He was critical of past attempts to market wool that delivered "bland, blended mediocrity" to customers in which soft-handling fleeces were aggregated in a commodity approach to wool as a product.

He said many growers had a "dependence mentality" because a statutory body had marketed wool on their behalf for four decades, unlike other industries where farmers had to do the marketing themselves.

He encouraged more private innovation - such as the successful Ice Breaker Merino company in New Zealand - and rethinking how research and development is undertaken "without the political interference" of a statutory body.

"We are not sharp and we are not customer-focused," he said.

"The current model is broken and has half destroyed the industry - and we are persisting with it.

"I'm saying no wool tax, but not saying no research. Genomics programs are a good example of research that has been of value."

He said a "disconnect from customers" had been worsened by a production focus only for wool.

But at the forum, AWI's Marius Cuming argued the organisation had many innovative marketing campaigns on the go which were delivering value for growers.

These included the Campaign for Wool supported by HRH the Prince of Wales, Merino. No Finer Feeling, and Woolmark Gold, targeting Chinese consumers. Others included Wool4Skool incorporating wool fashion design in school curriculums, Mothers and Babies where Merino wool was used in babywear, and Fashion by Feelings, AWI's first foray into social media.

He said AWI's new campaign Fibre of the Nation would address the disconnect between woolgrowers and wool users by using growers' stories to sell the fibre.

Mr Cuming also pointed to third-party endorsement of AWI's marketing efforts, including the Italian Wool Trade Association and International Wool Textile Organisation, among others.

Opinion at the forum was divided between growers who did not want to pay any wool tax and others who did not want the responsibility of marketing their wool and preferred to leave it to professional marketers.

For growers who did not see their role as marketers, Mr Massy said it was down to personal choice.

"Special marketing requires extra energy, dedication and a different framework of thinking," Mr Massy said.

"If they don't want to take such a route, that's their free choice - let them co-opt professionals who understand the field and market."



AWGA - News Update

NSW Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells also addressed the forum, but is best known for her state of the industry report to the Senate in 2009 titled *From the Farm to the Wardrobe - a snapshot of the Australian Wool Industry*.

She used her address to call for "one grower, one vote" in WoolPoll 2012, to make the process more democratic and bring a broader skillset to the AWI board.

"For wool to prosper into the future, it can't just be the squattocracy and a few hangers-on," she said.

"The wool industry is not just about the grower, it's about fashion, designers, and marketers as well."



Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells pictured with Hamilton woolgrower Michael Blake.