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Anger at AWI for genetic research cut

AUSTRALIAN Wool Innovation is under attack for failing to provide funding for a genetic research flock.

"I can't remember a time when the industry was so united in its opposition to an AWI decision." said WoolProducers vice-president Geoff Fisken.

The anger follows a decision to reject a proposal to provide annual funding of \$750,000 to the Information Nucleus Flock.

The AWI board took the decision despite a funding recommendation from its on-farm research manager, Jane Littlejohn, and a commitment from Meat and Livestock Australia.

This week the MLA approved a further \$2.2 million to maintain the research flock until 2014. But without AWI support it is likely testing for wool-related traits will eventually cease.

The flock, developed by the Sheep Co-operative Research Centre, provides progeny testing for the nation's top Merino and terminal sires as well as helping in the development of genomic or DNA profile testing.

Administered by the CRC, it involves 5000 Merino and crossbred ewes held at eight research sites, including Hamilton and Rutherglen.

Under a proposal to continue the flock, which would be administered by an industry committee, the ewes would be held at only two sites - Katanning, in Western Australia, and Armidale, in NSW.

In defending the board decision, AWI chief executive Stuart McCullough said there was "an insufficient bridge between science and commercial reality" to justify the funding.

But also angering producers were AWI chairman Wal Merriman's comments that science couldn't teach growers much new about breeding better Merino sheep and that he hadn't heard of any grower support for the nucleus flock.

Mr Merriman said AWI had met 1000 shareholders in recent months, and not one had mentioned the information nucleus flock.

"At the Dubbo meeting alone, we had 450 shareholders and not one, not one mentioned the information nucleus flock," he said.

"You have to ask who is getting the money from funding it?"

But producers who were invited by AWI to attend a feedback wool forum in Sydney in early May said the cessation of the funding was a big discussion point.

Forum attendee Dan Korff, manager of the Avington Merino stud at Sidonia, said many young breeders and producers were angry with the decision.

"We wanted to know what we could do to reverse the decision," Mr Korff said.

"Was he really serious?" he said with regard to Mr Merriman's comments that science had little to offer Merino breeders.

The science comment has also incensed Chad Taylor who has taken over the running of his parents' Mumblebone Merino stud at Wellington in NSW.

"That's a very insular comment," Mr Taylor.

"We have to use science and technology to find ways of boosting productivity.



AWGA - News Update

"Profitability for Merinos didn't simply rest with raising the cuts per head.

"The Merino is a complex animal and its profitability is not only about wool but raising fertility and carcass quality.

"It is ridiculous to suggest science can't help."

Tom Silcock, of the Mountain Dam Merino stud, at Balmoral, said he was disappointed with AWI's stance and Mr Merriman's comments.

"We've put a big investment into this genetic research, so why stop now?" Mr Silcock said.

"The science behind the genomic work is brilliant.

"This could be the most exciting advancement in sheep breeding in my lifetime.

"Cutting the nucleus flock will also lose out opportunity for benchmarking."

Andrew Michael, principal of the South Australian Leahcim Poll Merino and White Suffolk studs, described the nucleus flock as a "gold mine".

"It is sheep industry insurance for productivity," Mr Michael said.

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