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Will reason prevail in mulesing?

The Land
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DO reason, common sense and the weight of evidence win in the end? Not always, but at least in the case of mulesing they might be making a comeback.

Back in 2004 the radical animal rights group PETA launched a campaign against the sheep industry based on its opposition to mulesing. Targeting major clothing retailers in Europe and the US, it threatened to initiate a worldwide boycott of Australian wool unless the practice was stopped.

The industry's response was little short of blind panic. Driven by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), it agreed to phase-out of mulesing by 2010 on the assumption that acceptable alternatives could be developed by this time. AWI also took court action against PETA, later settled when PETA agreed to cease its activities until the end of 2010.

It turned out that developing alternatives to mulesing was more difficult than anticipated. The 2010 deadline came and went with nothing available. Trials involving clips and chemicals proved disappointing. As far as I know SkinTraction is the only product still in contention, and it has many limitations.

AWI's willingness to agree to phase out mulesing was not welcomed by all sheep producers, but alternative voices struggled to be heard. The board of AWI at the time, led by Ian McLachlan, was adamant that it was the only option.

Some were of the view, as I was, that alternatives needed to be every bit as good at controlling flystrike as mulesing, and cost no more, or sheep producers would continue mulesing but lock the gates or load the shotgun to keep out nosy parkers.

Flystrike is too big a problem to tolerate bullying or finger wagging by know-it-alls doing the bidding of extremists.

Times have obviously changed at AWI. The dissenters are now in the majority and the current board is in no mood to appease PETA, while staff no longer mutter about banning mulesing. While the official objective remains removing the need for it, expectations as to how long this might take are more realistic.

The need for patience was reinforced recently by a report by Mackinnon Project that found mulesing remains a better option for long term breech strike prevention, clearly ahead of both clips and long-acting insecticides, with benefits that are predictable and lifelong. A replacement might be found through either genetics or technology, but it might also take decades.

Radical animal rights groups, no fans of science, have little sympathy for this situation and signalled they will again seek to confront the sheep industry over mulesing. The industry's response may be crucial in determining its future.



AWGA - News Update

My hope is that, instead of attempting to reason with or try to mollify the radicals, or even bring in the lawyers, AWI will undertake a campaign to convince clothing retailers, and indeed anyone interested, that failure to use mulesing would condemn millions of sheep to a slow, agonising death from flystrike.

Reason, common sense and the weight of evidence are on their side. The harm caused by mulesing, which nobody disputes, is substantially less than the harm caused by flystrike. It's a trade-off that most people could easily understand. And if they cannot, then photos of flystrike every bit as gruesome as those of mulesing will help persuade them.

Indeed, such a campaign has the potential to portray the anti-mulesing activists as inhumane ideologues, something that would be of benefit to a lot more than just the sheep industry.

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