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Genetic selection 'will end need for mulesing'



Merino sheep bred under the SRS system that do not require mulesing

SHEEP welfare guidelines currently being drafted have failed to include genetic selection as an alternative to mulesing and in turn, put at risk the opportunities available from emerging markets for the Merino sector. Veterinarian and developer of the Soft Rolling Skin (SRS) system, Dr Jim Watts, said in a statement he was astounded the Welfare Standards Writing Group omits genetic selection as an alternative to mulesing and the reference it makes to genetic progress in this direction as being "slow" to achieve.

Dr Watts said Animal Health Australia's Sheep Standards and Guidelines Writing Group prepared a discussion paper in January that identified the 'main issues' associated with mulesing as: age limits before pain relief is required, knowledge, experience and skills to perform the task and availability of pain relief drugs.

Dr Watts said leading sheep industry experts had contested the guidelines and argued that genetically, there was not a problem in breeding animals that did not require mulesing and it could be done well within a five year timeline.

He said Merino breeders in every State in Australia had adopted genetic selection approaches which had produced such effective changes in wool, skin and disease resistance traits that they no longer need to mules their sheep.

The breeding system they have adopted is the Soft Rolling Skin or SRS system and it's based on improving the density and length of fibres grown by the animal, he said.

It has been applied to Merino sheep flocks in Australia since 1988 and today, 40 Merino studs selling over 11,000 rams annually have stopped mulesing their sheep, with commercial clients often following suit, he said.

"The transition from a sheep that is wrinkly and requires mulesing to a sheep that is plain bodied and does not need to be mulesed can be less than five years, and in some cases as rapid as three years," Dr Watts said.

"These mules-free Merino sheep are already out there in large numbers and are naturally resistant to all forms of flystrike, including the most severe and challenging body strike outbreaks during wet summers.

"Genetically there is not a problem in reaching the five year goal. The problem I come up against is persuading Merino wool producers that genetically, there is not a problem."



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The implications, however, of omitting breeding flystrike resistant sheep as an alternative to mulesing in Australia's sheep welfare standards will be far reaching for the Merino sector, he said.

"Merino wool's share of the world textile market is at an all-time low at 1.7 percent, yet the Australian wool textile supply chain is in a dilemma over the presence of declared non mulesed Merino bales being presented for sale," he said.

"The dilemma is that it demonstrates to the Merino wool textile supply chain that product from non mulesed animals in Australia is a reasonable expectation if the industry agreed to pursue a target such as a minimum of 50pc of the Merino wool clip being declared non mulesed; and it is undermined by the basis on which new sheep welfare guidelines are being prepared by Animal Health Australia."

Dr Watts said Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX) data over the past three selling seasons, showed the number of non mulesed declared adult Merino wool bales offered for sale has risen from 3.5pc to 4.8pc of total adult Merino wool bales.

In contrast, the number of ceased mulesing Merino bales has declined, while the number of pain relief declared Merino wool bales has increased significantly from 9.1pc in 2010-11 selling season to 17pc in the 2012-13 selling season to March 2013.

Dr Swan explained that wool textile's provenance and heritage are critical and this is based on the ability of the Merino wool sector to communicate the story of the product from farm to the existing and new emerging consumer demographics such as the 'affluent ageing' and 'little emperors'.

Such an approach is soundly based and currently enjoyed by a percentage of Merino producers, but according to Dr Watts, is under threat if sheep welfare is not accounted for in Merino wool's credentials.

"The industry, through its peak promotion and R& D organisation AWI, no longer has any strategic plan or date for achieving a target such as 50pc of adult Merino wool bales offered being sourced from non-mulesed flock," Dr Watts said.

"The Writing Group's perspective on the 'main issues' confirms this industry position to the world's textile companies and markets.

"In effect, it is saying to Merino wool buyers and consumers that the Australian industry accepts mulesing with some pain relief options as standard practice because alternatives to it are currently non-viable.

"On the other hand it knows that a significant minority of Merino stud breeders have found a genetic solution which avoids the need for mulesing."

Dr Watts said that no other country has the issue of mulesing associated with its clip, so buyers have alternative strategies to choose from, including buying from New Zealand, South America and South Africa and replacing Merino with other luxury natural fibres, or purchasing from the limited pool of declared non mulesed and ceased mulesing clips.

"There is a definite market risk associated with not promoting the breeding alternative to mulesing and failing to seriously encourage its adoption," Dr Watts said.

"Buyers and retailers don't want and can't afford to be involved in the politics of mulesing and for some it is likely to put purchasing Australian Merino in the 'too hard' basket.

"Even buying from declared non mulesed clips has its draw backs when the volumes and types available are limited.

"2011 world data for Merino wool production shows New Zealand, Argentina, Uruguay and South Africa produce a combined 60,000t (clean) non mulesed Merino wool (less than 24.5 micron) per year, while Australia's production of declared non mulesed Merino wool amounts to approximately 4200t."