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Farmers angered by AWI cut



AUSTRALIAN Wool Innovation (AWI) is deliberately or foolishly trying to steer its grower shareholders away from using genomics technology, according to some angry sheep industry leaders.

They were infuriated when AWI announced last week that it was abandoning the Bred Well Fed Well program because it could be commercially viable without being underwritten by AWI.

The workshops are funded by AWI and Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), as part of their Making More From Sheep Initiative.

"AWI is committed to investing in genetic and genomic research and development as outlined in the current Strategic Plan," a spokesman for AWI said.

"Due to the high level of uptake and commercial interest from industry for the Bred Well Fed Well program, the opportunity now exists to license out the provision of the service."

"AWI is holding discussions with MLA for a smooth exit of AWI funding over the coming months.

"The model of delivery is to be admired and so the development of a genetics extension program with a significantly increased wool focus is now under development."

But Petali Poll Merino stud principal Martin Oppenheimer, a Bred Well Fed Well workshop host and director of the Australian Wool Growers Association, Walcha, NSW, could not understand AWI's reluctance to embrace new technology as had been previously highlighted by its decision to cut funding to Sheep CRC's information nucleus flock.

"We're going to need productivity and progress, rather than having people there (at AWI) who are making ad hoc decisions on the run," he said.



AWGA - News Update

Mr Oppenheimer said statements made by AWI board members, particularly its chairman, Wal Merriman, at various forums during last year's WoolPoll campaign, had cast doubts on genomics and Australian Breedings Values (ASBVs).

"They were basically giving numbers about genomics - quoting numbers - that were misleading shareholders," he said.

"What they were saying at those meetings was incorrect, it was not the way genomics works, is not the way it's being recommended."

Another source, who did not want to be named, agreed with Mr Oppenheimer, saying "there was a rift in the board about what ASBVs were doing in the industry".

"You've got a few stud breeders out there who don't believe in ASBVs, and one of them is sitting in the chair," the source said.

AWI only signed on to phase two of the Bred Well Fed Well management agreement with MLA in June 2013, which was scheduled to run 90 programs over the next three years.

MLA was not notified that the program was being cut until after the decision was made.

Mr Merriman said the organisation was dealing with a shortfall of between \$4 million to \$6m in the last financial year due to lower than expected income from the statutory two per cent wool levy applied to sales of wool sold by Australian farmers.

In the 2011-12 financial year, the levy had earned AWI over \$48m of its more than \$70m revenue.

However AWI did not respond to questions about how much it would cost to pay out staffers contracted for Bred Well Fed Well, or on savings that could be made by axing support for the program.

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