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Wool grower fury over AWI cuts

WOOL growers are angry over Australian Wool Innovation's decision to cut funding from extension workshops.

Wool growers are furious that AWI plans to cut one of its most popular extension activities.

And fallout from the decision to cut funding to the Bred Well Fed Well workshops has seen some growers threaten to support a zero per cent levy at the next Wool Poll vote in 2015.

But mixed messages are being given for the reason the workshops are being cut.

AWI chairman Wal Merriman said it was due to a predicted budget shortfall of \$4 to \$6 million due to lower than expected wool prices.

He declined to comment further, saying it was an "operational matter".

And when The Weekly Times put a detailed series of questions over the cuts to AWI, a short response was given.

"The commitment made in the strategic plan will be honoured. An extension program with a much larger wool focus will be developed for next year," an AWI spokesman said.

AWI had committed to deliver 90 Bred Well Fed Well workshops over the next three years in its strategic plan released just two months ago.

Poll Merino breeder Andrew Michael from Leahcim Poll Merino stud at Snowtown in South Australia said the withdrawal of funding was "disgusting".

"I've spoken with plenty of people over the past few days and there is the argument that a per cent wool levy will get up at the next wool poll (in two years)," Mr Michael said. "My biggest fear is that this is only the start and I have no doubt things like Merino Select and Sheep Genetics Australia are also under the spotlight."

Wellington, NSW, Merino breeder Chad Taylor, from the Mumblebone stud, said he would also consider voting for a per cent levy at the next Wool Poll.

"If the AWI board is to walk away from the very information that can move the industry in a positive direction, I see little value in the organisation as a whole," he said.

"A per cent levy vote would be the obvious solution, leading to the possibility of a commercial replacement, complete with proper accountability, as a far more credible alternative. That, or a more progressive board."

A wool broker, who did not wish to be named, said the situation was "quite ridiculous".

"With one stroke of a pen, they have cost themselves a lot of problems," he said.

A spokesman for Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Food Security John Cobb said it was unfair to comment "prematurely" about any issues concerning AWI.

But should he be successful in the upcoming election, the spokesman said Mr Cobb would be seeking full briefings on a range of issues, including AWI.

http://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/article/2013/09/04/581875_wool.html