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Claim wool industry has responded poorly to welfare campaigns

[A former board director of Australian Wool Innovation says the industry isn't doing enough to manage the effects of animal welfare campaigns.

It comes after animal rights group, PETA, published footage it claimed to be of shearers in Australian sheds, punching and stomping on sheep.

Chick Olsson, who sat on the AWI board for five years and is now a director of the Australian Wool Growers Association, says the wool industry should have recognised that PETA was planning a new campaign.

"If you take a collective 10 year approach, I'd say it's been pretty average to appalling," Mr Olsson said.

PHOTO: Wool is handled in a shearing shed, December 2012. (ABC North and West SA: eloisesa)

"It's always been on the back foot. We've always waited for a crisis and then responded.

"As far as the levies go, I think we've really been disappointed and let down and we've got a lot to learn from other industries.

Audio: Peak wool bodies cop criticism for handling of PETA campaign (ABC Rural)

Last week, the wool industry's peak body, Wool Producers Australia, said it condemned the shearers' behaviour, but that it wasn't reflective of what goes on in the larger industry.

Meanwhile, the Shearing Contractors Association of Australia said it 'applauded' PETA for publishing the footage, and called it a wake-up call for the industry.

Mr Olsson believes the SCAA's approach is a more effective way to manage the campaigns run by groups like PETA.

"There are two worlds here," he said.

"One is our world in Australia, which is on farm, and then there's a big world where the fashion markets are.

"Those big fashion markets is where this action is being played out, and for all intents and purposes, when fashion retailers and young designers see this sort of stuff, that's the world they believe that we live in, the world that is commonplace, even though Wool Producers are right in what they're saying.

"My point is, what is the response? What are we going to do to combat this in the future? Because it's going to keep going on."

But former president of the Superfine Wool Growers Association, Helen Cathles, says the industry is handling animal rights groups effectively.

She's applauded Australian Wool Innovation for investing almost $8 million in training shearers and shedhands in best practise animal welfare over the past five years.

"They did that, not because of mishandling of animals, but because they recognised that that was [what] the industry had to target," Ms Cathles said.

"And that indeed we needed more shearers in the business. So it was from that perspective that those dollars were spent."

But Mrs Cathles says the industry needs a more 'proactive' marketing campaign with regards to animal welfare.

"Where we fall down is the fact that we haven't actually marketed how well we treat animals," she said.

"Our duty of care is really important to us and we haven't done any publicity on that, or any marketing.

"I remember back in 1998, I attended the international conference for women in agriculture and they had brochures there of how well they cared for their animals.

"So I think we need a campaign because we have to recognise that we're going to have to do this.

"It will be as important as any marketing program."

Meanwhile, Chick Olsson believes other industries, like pork and poultry, are one step ahead in terms of marketing animal welfare practises.

"Free range eggs now are becoming commonplace [and] we've seen sow stalls being banned [due to] consumer pressure," he said.

"And there's huge consumer pressure on wool, whether you like it or not."

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-14/wool-industry-approach-to-animal-welfare/5594956#.U8NYCBzXYmU.email