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Realising the Merino's meaty potential



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Martin Oppenheimer, "Petali", Walcha, NSW, with a woollen suit from the Nanshan Group's wool production chain in China's Shandong Province, where the company has capacity to produce up to five million suits a year.

It was only a fortnight, but for Walcha, NSW, stud Merino producer Martin Oppenheimer a whistle stop tour of Chinese wool processing and plants and other farm sector insights was enough to confirm his enthusiasm about the prospects for Australian Merinos.

The breed was much more than just a premium force in the fibre market, it was providing the basis for another much-valued Chinese import - meat.

"We can't just sit around waiting for the wool market to become far more valuable again - we've got to accept big gains in lamb production have underpinned the sustainability of our Merino flock and woolgrowing in the past decade," said Mr Oppenheimer, a director of the Australian Wool Growers Association.

China was hungry for meat, and had traditional taste for sheepmeat.

"Australia is soon going to be the world's number one lamb exporter as New Zealand sheep numbers continue to lose ground to dairy cows," he said.

"We can take full advantage of the dual purpose capacity and the good lamb growth rates in our Merino (and Merino-cross) flocks, without sacrificing the breed's woolgrowing achievements.

"We're in a unique position.

"We've already got fibre production capacity well suited to our environment and we can fine tune the breed's meat production characteristics by selecting for a bit more fat and muscle.

"I'm confident there'll be some big genetic gains achieved in the next five to 10 years which will make Merinos even more valuable."



AWGA - News Update

Mr Oppenheimer and his wife Cheryl, "Petali", were part of last month's 12-day Elders China Wool Tour which took 47 participants from Shanghai to Inner Mongolia and Beijing.

He said visiting the grazing plains of Inner Mongolia confirmed that Chinese interest in sheep production was likely to increasingly focus on meat rather than undermine Australia's massive wool market in China.

Meanwhile, the growth in Chinese consumers desire for natural products and quality provided reassurances the wool market also had a big future.

While it may be hard to build demand in the suiting fabric market, there was a lot of scope for growth in the knitted garment sector as the casual clothing market boomed, and because its manufacturing processes were less labour-intensive.

Babywear, in particular, showed a lot of potential in China, while globally wool was also experiencing a surge in popularity in the furnishing market, partly because of its natural fire resistant and easy cleaning qualities.

"I'm pretty excited by both the wool and meat opportunities ahead," Mr Oppenheimer said.

"There was certainly nothing that concerned me about what we saw in China."

Andrew Marshall travelled to China as a guest on this month's Elders China Wool Tour.

<http://www.queenslandcountrylife.com.au/news/agriculture/sheep/meat/realising-the-merinos-meaty-potential/2703749.aspx?storypage=0>