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Australian Wool Innovation criticised by major wool growers

AUSTRALIAN Wool Innovation has been slammed as “irrelevant” and “insignificant” by some of the nation’s biggest wool growers.

The criticism comes ahead of this year’s WoolPoll, which will determine the amount of grower levy funding for the next three years, and the biannual AWI board elections.

Growers say they are frustrated with AWI’s rate of internal spending, marketing programs they claim haven’t delivered rewards to the farm gate, and a “backwards” approach to research.

In 2013, AWI refused to back an extension of the Sheep Co-operative Research Centre, a year after it withdrew its funding from the industry’s information nucleus flock.

Former Wool Corporation boss Hugh Beggs, who runs 7000 ewes at Glenthompson in the Western District, told *The Weekly Times* AWI hadn’t “really been significant for the last few years” and said the current board had “not been in any way progressive”.

Dunkeld Pastoral Company principal and leading Melbourne barrister Allan Myers, who has switched from superfine Merinos to prime lambs in recent years because of poor wool returns, said AWI had done little “apart from consume large sums of money”.

“Nothing they ever did (on genetics) achieved anything and nothing they did ever achieved anything with marketing,” Mr Myers said. “Technological changes have made them even less relevant.”

Jim Litchfield, whose Hazeldean Merino stud runs 14,000 ewes and sells 800 rams a year, said AWI was “pretty traditional in its outlook” and it was “a shame they’re not taking a bit more of a proactive role” in regards to research and innovation.

Australian Wool Growers Association director Martin Oppenheimer said AWI wasn’t doing “anything particularly wrong” at the moment, but “the model is not the right model to take the industry forward”.

He said the adoption of a 1-1.5 per cent levy at this year’s WoolPoll “would be a reasonable outcome ... based on the performance of the company”.

Currently, all wool growers are required to pay a 2 per cent levy to AWI.

With a third of the current AWI board to retire or stand for re-election at its November annual general meeting, Mr Oppenheimer said it was “very important to have new blood come in” adding “some board members have been there for too long”.

An AWI spokesman said an independent review of the organisation’s performance was under way and would be “going through the entire business”.

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