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## Gunning wool graziers call for more research funding for genomics



Gunning sheep farmers Greg and Trish Hallam on their farm. They still love their life on the land. *Photo: Karleen Minney*

Fifteen years ago the penny dropped for Gunning wool grazier Greg Hallam and his wife Trish who switched to a more scientific and profitable way of producing fibre. Now they are puzzled why their peak industry body is undermining genetic research.

They believe genetic science made "Springfield", their 800-hectare farm, more profitable after they adopted veterinarian and former CSIRO scientist Dr Jim Watts' Soft Rolling Skins breeding system. They left their smaller-framed sheep with crinkly fleeces and began producing a dual-purpose merino, which is longer, plainer bodied and suitable for meat production as well as wool.

It has a higher lambing rate and does not need mulesing, a controversial practice of cutting strips of skins from sheep to avoid fly strike. The sheep produce more wool and are shorn three times every two years.

"The merino wool quality hasn't changed really, the appearance of it has. Where the traditional superfine wool was very fine crimped wool, the SRS wool is not, it is a broader, bold crimped wool, but its microns are very fine," Mr Hallam said.

Earlier this month Australian Wool Innovation, the growers peak marketing and research body, released an independent analysis of investment in genetics and genomics from 2010 to 2013, which found it returned just 0.45 cents for every \$1 invested. The findings have been slammed by other industry groups and growers for being short-sighted.

Mrs Hallam said: "AWI is talking about cutting back their funding for the genome research. Why? This is the most exciting thing happening in the wool industry, they [researchers] are going right into the gene factor of sheep, they are finding which one is worm resistant, which one has got the best meat, why would AWI cut back on funding?"



# AWGA - News Update

The Hallams are asking why university graduates eager to study wool fibre development can't get funding from their industry. Mrs Hallam said: "Is it because some studs are putting pressure on [AWI]; that they are going one way, and others are going the other? I don't know."

Mr Hallam says in one of the wool industry's best innovations, studs provide a wealth of data on their sheep's performance on many measures ranging from fat content to weaning. Yet some studs were reluctant to give figures.

A spokesman said AWI remained committed to genetic investments and would invest \$3.3 million in the Lifetime Productivity Project, and had invested more than \$40 million in genetic and genomic research over the past 14 years.

"It is entirely appropriate that AWI measure the outcomes. AWI expected a wide diversity of views on the report [released earlier this month], including predictable dissatisfaction from those who are or have been beneficiaries," the spokesman said. He said AWI was obliged to evaluate its programs and release its findings.

Mr Hallam said changing course in a conservative industry 15 years ago was bold, but these days he and his wife were more enthusiastic than ever. "I love it," he said.

"From March, 2014, to the end of February, 2015, is the best season I have ever seen here. It was truly magnificent, " he said. Rain came at the right time and kept coming.

The Department of Agricultural commodities report forecasts a 3.1 per cent increase in the gross value of farm production to about \$53.7 billion in 2015-16. Export earnings for wool are forecast to rise by 5 per cent.

Mr Hallam said this was the first time he had seen healthy prices for cattle, sheep, and sheep meat all at the same time. A framed, aerial photograph of Springfield taken last year hangs from their dining-room wall, showing lush, green pasture rewarding farmers who for more than half a century have toiled through good seasons and bad.

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/gunning-wool-graziers-call-for-more-research-funding-for-genomics-20150626-ghoc0p?skin=dumb-phone>