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Welfare standards losing business



Vitale Barberis Canonico raw material buying manager Davide Fontaneto says the optional use of analgesic for the surgical mulesing procedure was out of touch with customers' animal welfare expectations.

A perception by brands the Australian wool industry's animal welfare practices are not up to acceptable standards has seen some Merino wool processors bypass the country to source wool from New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina.

This is according to Vitale Barberis Canonico raw material buying manager Davide Fontaneto who said Australia's position, which did not require mandatory use of analgesic for the surgical mulesing procedure, had damaged the perception of Australian wool across the world.

"A few years ago customers were asking for fabric from non-mulesed (NM) wool, but now we are seeing a trend when they are asking for fabric that is not made from Australian wool," Mr Fontaneto said.

"I think that is a strong message that must be communicated to the Australian woolgrower - why should we lose the best wool in the world because of this?"

During the recent VBC Wool Excellence Award held in Melbourne, Mr Fontaneto told the crowd of 50 woolgrower "club members" and industry players that there was mounting pressure for VBC to move away from pain relief status wool to only NM wool.



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"I think that Australia as a country should make analgesic application at least compulsory, if not banning mulesing altogether, or risk further business loss," Mr Fontaneto said.

"Unfortunately for some, Australia is seen as a place where sheep are cruelly treated because of a lack of legislation that has still to be brought up to the standards of today's society and beliefs".

"We must communicate that (VBC woolgrowers') animals are happy, healthy and that you are doing your utmost to provide them with the best possible life."

But on the vexed issue of fly strike prevention, Mr Fontaneto was torn on whether mulesing or not mulesing was better.

"I certainly am not making a moral judgement here of what is the best form of control. I have seen sheep die because of the fly, and this is really distressing and painful," he said.

"But we are in the 21st century and if we decide to mules we must use pain relief, and the best would be the use of an analgesic before the surgery."

The Italian textile maker purchases nearly 30,000 bales of NM or pain relief (PR) certified wool from the Australian market.

In recent years pressure to source NM-status wool has resulted in the 353 year-old company acquiring increasing amounts from South Africa, New Zealand and South America.

"There is the possibility that pain relief may no longer be enough," he said.

"We need to reach a point in which the animal is free of pain through analgesic, not just cause the pain and then give it something".

"These problems should have been solved by 2010, six years ago, but we are still here talking about it. The deadline should be tomorrow, we are late."



New England Wool managing director Andrew Blanch said the current 540 SustainaWOOL accredited farms produce about 45,000 bales annually under the scheme.

Consumer pressure filtering down from its Italian shareholders and clients was the catalyst for New England Wools' SustainaWOOL Integrity Scheme – a declaration of environmentally and ethically produced wool – as brands demand to know more about the production of the raw material that goes into their finished products.

“Provenance or a ‘story’ going back to the source is becoming a requirement, and within that story, consumers want to be comfortable that the wool was sourced from farms and farmers that care for their stock and their environment – now and for the future,” New England Wool managing director Andrew Blanch said.

It is estimated that the current 540 SustainaWOOL accredited farms produce about 45,000 bales annually under the scheme.

Mr Blanch said at recent Sydney wool auctions, just over 20pc of the offering was SustainaWOOL accredited.

“We need to fight back – not with marketing banter or excuses, but with a solid, high integrity, audited scheme,” he said. “I am not talking just about SustainWOOL, but the National Wool Declaration (NWD) as well.

“We have no doubt that the majority of wool growers are professional and do have respect for the land and stock they manage... we need to tell that story because the average consumer does not know this, and other countries are promoting themselves as having higher animal welfare credentials than Australia.”

Modiano chief executive Laurence Modiano, whose company is one of the top 10 buyers of Australian merino wool, said the stigma attached to the Australian wool industry had resulted in clients' wool orders specifying non-Australian origin and Argentinian wool as a result of targeted animal activist campaigns in the countries.



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“Animal welfare considerations have now taken a firm grip of the wool industry and there is no going back,” Mr Modiano said.

“We expect the demand for NM to continue increasing.”

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