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“Wool crippled by Animal Rights Lobbyists”.

Last week, Australian Woolgrowers were stunned at the news that US fashion retailer Abercrombie and Fitch had boycotted Australian merino fibre in all its stores. It seems that Australian wool industry's woes are to continue, indeed, maybe get worse.

It has been known for some time that the extreme but necessary operation of mulesing has been unpopular among animal rights groups. World markets have changed, with perceptions about products becoming a major factor in consumers' purchasing decisions. These perceptions are mainly city orientated, and no matter what woolgrowers say in the defence of mulesing, it won't change consumers' perceptions of this harsh operation.

Considering that women's fashion has been identified as a key target market by AWI, once city consumers become further aware of such practices in the process of growing merino wool, it will be very difficult to expect consumers to support Australian merino wool with such revelations as these from Animal Ethics Groups and high profile and influential pop stars such as Chrissie Hynde.

It is noted that there has been some attempt by wool industry groups to “rebuff” such assertions by animal welfare groups, including in the past the RSPCA, but this is now simply too little and too late. The damage has been done with animal rights groups utilising the power of electronic media worldwide, now urging other US retailers to join in the embargo against our mulesing operations and live sheep exports.

It is time to admit that if these animal rights groups can influence major US retailers' decisions so effectively, then we must immediately open dialog with these groups to demonstrate our shared goals of finding alternative preventative measures to the very real threat of blowfly strike and the slow and totally inhumane death that follows, and set an agenda for change. The US fashion market represents a gold mine for Australian Merino fibre and if other countries follow suit then the effect will be simply catastrophic.

Indeed woolgrower funds have been expended on this very real issue in recent years with Australian Wool Innovation initiating permanent hair removal research in conjunction with Adelaide University and in addition, Breech Flystrike prevention technology research with CSIRO, (source AWI Operating Plan 2002-03).

Now more than ever, with poor wool prices and now international attention spotlighting our animal health practices, woolgrowers need urgently the industry R&D body AWI to inform not only woolgrowers but the world generally that the issue is being addressed, including advising projected timeframes for delivery of a commercial viable alternative.

By stating that 3,000,000 sheep annually are now at risk of fly strike if the operation ceases is an old maxim that won't mean anything to US consumers. Any perceived cruelty to animals will be punished by a closure of markets. The US just doesn't care if it doesn't buy Australian wool, as there are plenty of other fibres to choose from.



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Australian woolgrowers simply can not afford to allow this to threat to escalate into reality. Full disclosure of the current standing on the developing alternatives needs to occur immediately if the industry is to demonstrate it is responsive to consumer concerns.

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