



Information Exchange

The newsletter of the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network

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High input prices set to continue

RAPID CHANGES in the global economy are driving a boom in agriculture and record commodity prices for grains.

But the flip side of the commodity boom is rising costs for agricultural inputs such as fertiliser and chemicals.

Speaking to a recent BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB phone conference, Nufarm Australasia's general manager Lachlan McKinnon said a booming world population, increasing urbanisation, rising consumer wealth, growing biofuel production and limited arable land were key factors behind the commodity boom.

"Agriculture is now demand driven and we are seeing world record prices for grain," he said.

"As a result, we can expect the prices for farm inputs to remain high in the foreseeable future."

With a world population of 6.6 billion across 228 nations, the key players in the changing world economy are China, with 20% of the world's population, and India, with 17.1%.

"A quarter of the world's population lives in cities and there are more than 500 cities with populations in excess of one million people. The world



Increasing global demand is pushing up prices for agricultural chemicals.

is urbanising at a very fast rate," Lachlan said

For example, China, which was ranked as the 11th largest world economy in 1987, was ranked third behind the US and Japan in 2007 and is tipped to be in second place some time between 2015 and 2020.

The surge of wealth in countries such as China, India and parts of South America mean these countries are rapidly growing markets for increasingly sophisticated, quality foods.

Increasing demand for biofuel is also driving global demand

for crops and putting further pressure on supplies of grain for human consumption and stock feed, which is, in turn, driving up demand for inputs such as herbicides and fertilisers.

Record wheat prices, along with food shortages, were creating a massive incentive for producers to increase their cropping production, Lachlan said.

But while farmers could change the enterprise mix on their farms, there is a limited capacity for new land to become available for agriculture. That means the key to increasing production rests

mainly with optimising yields through fertiliser, weed and pest control, and plant breeding technology.

Vast areas of available land in eastern and western Europe and the US are being sown this season to capitalise on the demand-driven record prices.

Lachlan said this would result in an increase in the global demand for products such as glyphosate, atrazine and other agricultural chemicals in the foreseeable future.

"The production capacity of manufacturing plants has not kept pace with the sudden surge in demand for agricultural chemicals and it will take some time before any significant increased production comes on line to ease supply constraints," he said.

A copy of Lachlan's presentation, along with Nufarm Australia's R&D manager Andrew Wells' presentation about spray grazing, is available on the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB website at www.bestwool.com, under the event calendar link for May 2.

A CD of both presentations is available by phoning Annette Taylor on (03) 5355 0531. ■

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Sheep meat quality starts on-farm

IF LAMB is to keep building on the huge gains in improved carcass quality and yield, producers will need to continue to improve its meat quality, consistency and value for money, according to sheep meat researcher Dr Dave Pethick.

Dave, a Professor in Biochemistry and Nutrition at Murdoch University, WA, was a key member of the Sheep Meat Eating Quality team and heads the Meat Science Program of the Sheep CRC.

Over fat lambs

Speaking at the Feweture Farming conference in Bendigo, at the end of May, Dave said over fat lamb was still an issue, even though fat – intramuscular fat in particular – was important for taste and because fat cover affects reproductive fitness in ewes.

“When we started work on sheep meat eating quality (SMEQ) there were a number of challenges regarding consistency and tenderness,” he said. “Consumers believed chicken provided less variability in eating quality than lamb.

“As Merino breeders change their focus to meat production, we need to address the fact that meat from Merinos tends to have

a higher pH, which adversely affects meat colour, flavour and shelf life.”

Most practices, from farm to plate, have an affect on eating quality, but changing practices often involved little cost or improved farm efficiency, Dave said.

On-farm practices

On-farm practices that influence meat quality include breeding, pre-slaughter nutrition and management to reduce stress.

Selecting sires that balance growth and muscle results in fast-growing animals that



Farmer practices affect lambing eating quality.

put down more muscle and less fat. Faster-growing lambs spend less time on pasture or in a feedlot and reach market specifications quicker.

Carcass weights with fat scores of 2-3 ensure adequate fat for taste and minimal fat for trim.

More fat cover did not increase intramuscular fat, Dave said.

Finishing systems

“The type of finishing system has little effect on eating quality, providing sheep are gaining weight (100g/d for crossbred, 150g/d for Meino lambs) in the two weeks before slaughter,” he said.

“When animals are stressed pre-slaughter by low nutrition, being handled and exercised, and introduced to foreign places, they lose glycogen stored in their muscles. Low levels of glycogen pre-slaughter can lead to high pH meat, unappealing meat colour and a shorter shelf life.

“Minimising on-farm stress through good stock handling and not exceeding curfew periods can help maximise the quality of the product, especially for Merino lambs, which are prone to higher glycogen loss at slaughter.” ■

Get active with wool

SUPERFINE MERINO wool is proving to be just as comfortable in the Amazonian jungle, up Mount Everest and on Bass Strait as it is on the fashion catwalks of Europe.

A range of active wear produced by iconic Australian company Driza-bone® is putting fine Merino wool into the demanding sports environment, where it is proving popular.

Driza-bone Activ Merino sportswear has been worn by:

- Shaun Bacon during the seven-day Amazon marathon;
- every participant in the Mark Webber Challenge adventure race in Tasmania;
- the crew of consecutive Sydney to Hobart line-honours-winning yacht Wild Oats XI;
- skiers on snow fields throughout the world; and
- climbers on the slopes of Mt Everest.

Speaking at the recent Feweture farming conference in Bendigo, Chris Bradford, the

Driza-bone Activ sales and marketing manager for Australasia, said Merino wool had a lot to offer consumers.

“Driza-bone is a company that has been around since 1896 and has a reputation for performance and protecting people from the elements,” he said.

“Our oilskin coats have been extremely popular, but we were looking to move with the changing times and markets to broaden our business, and Australian Merino wool has so much to offer.

“Superfine Merino wool has fantastic attributes in terms of moisture absorption, breathability, UV protection, anti static, natural stretch, comfort next to the skin, and resistance to stains and odours. There’s a clear trend in the outdoor garment sector towards Merino wool as a preferred fibre.

“It is also a natural, sustainable and renewable fibre, which is important to today’s consumers.”

The product is made from 17.7 micron wool bought from growers through The Merino Company.

“There’s a clear demand for finer Merino wool from consumers, regardless of the market sector,” Chris said.

“Our customers also have a preference for products that don’t harm the environment and for wool from non-mulesed flocks.

“While we source 95% of our wool from flocks that no longer mules their sheep, we need to have a certification process in place that can verify how the wool is grown before we can make any claims to consumers.

“We don’t want to tell wool producers what to do, but as a clothing manufacturer we understand that our success rests in giving consumers what they want.”

For more information about Driza-bone Activ, visit the product website at www.drizaboneactiv.com.

Mulesing alternatives

WOOLGROWERS ARE keen to develop alternative strategies to minimise the risk of breech strike, with most properties having two drops of lambs to mark before there is an end to mulesing in 2010.

Alternatives to surgical mulesing were the theme of two BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB meetings held by the Coonooer Bridge and Loddon Valley groups run by Greg Smith.

"People are very conscious that the 2010 deadline is not far away and are keen to weigh up their options and work out what management changes – if any – they will need to make to continue with sheep after the 2010 deadline," Greg said.

Options

The two meetings both featured Australian Wool Innovation's manager for blowfly control, Ian Evans, who went through the various alternatives to mulesing, including:

- clips;
- pain relief (in the lead up to 2010);
- intradermal injections (under commercial development);
- sheep breeding and classing to reduce wrinkles;
- management to reduce dags, stain and fly populations;
- the targeted use of chemicals; and
- the bare breech gene.

The day at St Arnaud with the Coonooer Bridge group attracted 35 people and the day at the Hooke family's property at Serpentine drew an audience of 20.

Robert Hooke and his two sons, Karl and Will, operate Willera Merinos on properties at Serpentine and in the Riverina.

Plainer bodies

The Hookes run 8500 commercial Merino ewes, along with a stud flock of 500 ewes, and are using genetics to help reduce the need for mulesing by breeding plainer bodied sheep to eliminate wrinkles.

The Hookes sell about 100 rams a year and have seen increasing inquiries from woolgrowers for rams that will produce progeny that do not require mulesing.

"Our sheep cut an average of 8kg greasy per head of 20 micron wool," Robert said.

"We're not chasing the bare breech gene, but have been working at getting plainer bodied sheep and have used Jim Watts as our stud consultant for the past 10 years.

"As a result, the sheep we are breeding today have a lot fewer wrinkles and are



Robert Hookes shows BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB members the results of his breeding program.

more easy care, but they still cut good weight fleeces because they have staple length and follicle density."

Robert said most woolgrowers had sheep with some plain bodied characteristics that could potentially reduce the need for mulesing if the correct husbandry was used.

"Everyone has plain bodied sheep in their flocks – the challenge is to try and get as many as possible that don't have big wrinkles around the tail, and to make sure these sheep are still productive," he said.

Unmulesed

Last season the Hookes decided to put their approach to the test and only selectively mulesed lambs with wrinkles on their Serpentine property. Lambs with plain bodies were left unmulesed.

"So far, so good, but obviously the risk of fly strike depends on the season and this season was very dry during the months when we run the risk of humid weather, namely November and April," Robert said.

"Obviously management is going to have to be spot on, and the timing of crutching and shearing will help reduce the risk of flystrike in these unmulesed sheep.

"We have crutched the unmulesed lambs and will be shearing them soon, and haven't had any negative comments from the shearers simply because they were very plain bodied sheep."

Robert recognises that genetic progress takes time and will involve classing young sheep in favour of plainer bodies and culling the wrinklier, shorter stapled and tighter fleeced animals.

"For some people this may mean that their productivity will drop initially, until they can breed sheep with greater staple length and follicle density to increase their fleece weights," he said. ■

Grasslands Conference

Sustainable grazing in wool production and grazing cereals will feature on the program at the annual Grasslands Conference at the Bairnsdale Aquatic and Recreation Centre on August 14-15.

This year's theme is 'Survive – Adapt – Prosper'.

Topics covered include:

- *maximising the return from fertiliser with John Webbware;*
- *the interaction between rhizobia and Boron with Leo Hamilton;*
- *organic farming;*
- *pasture cropping with Colin Seis;*
- *increasing soil carbon; and*
- *the latest on PRGT with Annette Litherland from NZ.*

For more information, phone (03) 5480 3305 or e-mail office@grasslands.org.au.

Nuffield scholarships

BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB members wanting to expand their agricultural knowledge by travelling overseas should look at applying for a Nuffield Farming scholarship.

The Australian Nuffield Farming Scholars Association awards scholarships to farmers with the aim of increasing their practical farming knowledge and management skills and broadening people's understanding of agricultural issues and opportunities in a global context.

Scholars can travel to study farming practices in Europe, Asia and North America, and those countries best suited to their chosen topic.

Nuffield scholarships give a unique opportunity to stand back from your day-to-day occupation and to study a subject of interest to you. You do not need academic qualifications, but you will need to persuade the selectors that you have the qualities to make the best use of the opportunity provided by the scholarship.

Applications close June 30.

If you would like advice on a possible topic or additional support, phone AWI on (02) 9299 5155.

Newsletter contributions

We are keen to hear suggestions for this newsletter and are happy to take contributions. Phone Jane Court on (03) 5735 4351.

Continuing to innovate as we turn 10

HOW TIME has flown. The new annual BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB Sheep Update at Bendigo – which we see as a major step forward – has been and gone. What a great achievement for our program.

I would like to thank all those who attended, as well as the presenters who invested their time, effort and expertise to make it a huge success.

The positive and enthusiastic comments I received made me especially proud of what makes BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB Australia's largest and best sheep education and extension network, in particular the devotion to delivering value to members by our program sponsors, the Victorian Department of Primary Industries, Australian Wool Innovation, and Meat and Livestock Australia.

While I am recognising those



Jamie Ramage,
chairman,
BESTWOOL/
BESTLAMB

people who are crucial to the success of BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB, I must talk about the dedication and high level of professionalism of our co-ordinator groups.

These men and women power the program and our overall success is due in large part to them (the good news is that there are also lots of new groups starting up).

While most people may take for granted the quality of our co-ordinators, the advisory committee sees skills training for our co-ordinators as vital

for maintaining the highest possible standards of service to members.

Training session

In May, our training session at Bendigo was weighted towards learning about the Grain and Graze program, with Cam Nicholson giving an in depth summary of its associated trial work.

This stimulated great discussion about the opportunities available to livestock producers and how the concept can be used to make money in the paddock.

10th birthday

Believe it or not, the different incarnations of BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB will be 10 years old in the middle of the year.

To record this achievement, we have decided to ask some long-standing groups to make

some digital recordings as an oral history of the program.

The past 10 years have seen massive changes to livestock production, as well as to rural communities, across the state.

In my opinion it is important that we recognise our past achievements.

With thanks

Before I sign off, I must express my deep admiration for all the people who have served on the advisory committee and worked in administration over the past 10 years.

It has also been an absolute privilege to work with excellent people such as Lyndon Kubeil and Annette Taylor, who have worked beyond the call of duty for BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB over the past two years (I also thank their partners Bill and Sharon for their sacrifices). ■

SMOKO

Dear Dad

A father passing by his son's bedroom was astonished to see the bed nicely made and everything tidy. Then he saw an envelope propped up on the pillow. It was addressed, 'Dad'. With the worst thoughts in mind, he opened the envelope and read the letter with trembling hands.

Dear Dad

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with Mum and you.

I've been finding real passion with Stacy, and she is so nice, but I knew you would not approve of her because of all her piercings, tattoos, her tight motorcycle clothes and because she is so much older than I am.

But it's not only the passion, Dad. She's pregnant.

Stacy said that we will be very happy. She owns a trailer in the

woods, and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. We share a dream of having many more children.

Stacy has opened my eyes to the fact that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone. We'll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with the other people in the commune for all the cocaine and ecstasy we want.

In the meantime, we'll pray that science will find a cure for AIDS, so that Stacy can get better. She sure deserves it!

Don't worry Dad, I'm 15, and I know how to take care of myself. Someday, I'm sure we'll be back to visit, so you can get to know your many grandchildren.

Love your son, Joshua.

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at Jason's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the school report that's on my desk.



BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB is a co-operative program for wool and lamb producers seeking to boost their farm profit and productivity.

For information about the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network, phone (03) 5355 0531, e-mail bestwool@vff.org.au or visit www.bestwool.com