

Marks & Spencer takes first organic wool

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UK retailer Marks & Spencer will be selling Australian organic Merino wool jumpers next month.

The development is a significant sign of the times and involves wool from The Merino Company and Ciel Textiles.

It is an example of where consumers concern for the future is being manifest in market niches.

Whether these niche markets develop into mainstream markets is yet to be seen but The Merino Company (TMC) is testing the waters of not only the demand for organic wool but ZeroC02 "carbon neutral" wool, Generation W "ethically produced" wool and even Antipodes "heritage wool", where one family has produced wool from a particular area for six generations.

But for now, TMC are supplying Marks & Spencer with 140 tonnes of 19.5 micron organic wool over the next year.

This may not be a huge volume of wool but next month 11,000 naturally organic wool men's "sweaters" will be in their many stores and retail for just under 30 pounds or \$A70.

One woolgrower very pleased with the development is former Australian Wool Corporation chairman Mac Drysdale.

He produces organic lamb and wool at his property, "Perola Park" near Augathella in south western Queensland.

For him the organic movement is more than a market niche, it is a philosophy based on his reduced reliance on chemicals in a very dry climate.

He hopes to receive a 25 per cent premium for selling his wool as organic. The payments are made in two parts; firstly Mr Drysdale is paid the full spot value of his wool straight away; then secondly, an additional premium once the full value of the TMC organic wool pool has been finalized. The final premium will be paid after the end of the pools financial year closure, by September 30th '08 at the very latest.

"I am really delighted with the system because traceability is the key here as it maintains the credibility and producers like me get a kick out of knowing exactly where my wool is going and that may well mean right through to retail. We hope TMC can take the wool as far down the processing chain as possible."

Mr Drysdale has been an organic producer for many years and sells organic lamb for up to \$120 a head and while this is a very good financial result he

would be happy to sell his 19 micron wool for \$40 to \$50 per ewe fleece and hopes to achieve a \$7 premium through selling in this way.

Marks & Spencer announced their "Plan A" earlier this year, a \$A450 million dollar plan over the next five years to be more sustainable in everything it does.

SOURCE: Extract from national sheep and wool news in Rural Press weekly agricultural papers November 15, updated daily on *FarmOnline*

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