

Can wool afford a mulesing fight it can't win ?



OPINION

By
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BEFORE anybody decides to abandon the 2010 deadline to end mulesing, the wool industry needs to ask itself: 'Can we really afford any more bad publicity?'

Some argue that decision to phase out mulesing by 2010 was premature – an opinion it seems is shared by many on the new board of Australian Wool Innovation. That's understandable given the lack of a truly viable alternative to mulesing.

It would be nice to think People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) will go away and leave us but they won't.

It would be nice to believe they lack credibility or pulling power but to do so is unwise.

If the Australian wool industry

capitulates and doesn't heed the 2010 deadline, PETA'S next round of demonstration against mulesing will likely eclipse anything to date.

I do not condone PETA'S behavior for one second – nor that of any radical group that offers ultimatums no solutions.

But ignoring their attacks won't make them go away.

The industry has a great opportunity to use the looming 2010 deadline as a springboard to gain some much needed positive publicity on an international scale. This would be a radical step for an industry not known for its solidarity.

I understand perfectly well the issues surrounding unmulesed Merino sheep and the increased management and cost issues related to running them.

Ceasing mulesing will not be easy and is a difficult ask.

PETA has already ruled out the use of clips and pain relief spray as an alternative and ethical solution to mulesing.

Breeding sheep less susceptible to flystrike appears to be the

only alternative – a challenge that will take us a long way past the 2010 deadline.

But to continue mulesing after 2010 with flagrant disregard to the agreed deadline, will cause a gradual, but imminent decline in wool use as a result of negative publicity by PETA.

Make no mistake, there will a market for mulesed wool.

Our biggest client, China, will happily buy it and about 40 per cent of what they buy is used domestically through Chinese retailers PETA is unlikely to take on.

But do we really want to limit our wool production to domestic Chinese brands and retailers?

Is the supply of these brands likely to give us the kind of returns we need to make the industry sustainable in the future? I think not.

PETA will focus its energies on any successful and highly visible western brand or company which use mulesed wool.

This ongoing negative

publicity and consequential reduction in use of wool as a result, will chip away at the foundations on which wool sits.

Blind Freddy can see that wool is not essential for the world's survival and if it became extinct tomorrow, the world would not even blink – though many might shed a tear.

The world's consumers are becoming increasingly aware of environmental and ethical issues associated with farm production – and will increasingly make their purchasing choices based on these issues.

When McDonalds was under pressure from radical nutritionists over the health aspects of their products, they did not put their head in the sand and resolve to absorb the barrage of bad publicity.

Instead, they bit the bullet and introduced a range of new food products.

Their Healthy Choices menu has been a resounding success and it seems McDonalds has regained all the ground it lost.

Wool has the ability to tick many of the environmental and ethical boxes on consumers' lists with relative ease – especially in comparison to cotton and man-made fibres.

But Australian wool must adopt and embrace production standards which complement its natural fibre status and must continue with innovative marketing to differentiate it from other fibres.

I would implore the Australian wool industry to see the logic in honouring the 2010 commitment.

There's an opportunity to use it to our advantage, not detriment, as some in the industry seem determined to do by digging in for another battle we cannot win.

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