



AUSTRALIAN SUPERFINE WOOL GROWERS' ASSOCIATION INC

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ASWGA Goulburn-Yass Region Report March 2009

Australian Superfine Wool Growers' Association Goulburn-Yass Regional report 13th March 2009

The vagaries of a variable climate again have been clearly demonstrated since November. After disappointing rainfall in early Spring, above average rainfall was received across the Region in November and December and further falls in early January although the latter being storm rain, coverage was patchy. As a result reasonable dry matter was produced albeit in many cases with a high proportion of undesirable species (e.g. *Stipa spp.*). Since mid-January rainfall has been minimal and with Autumn upon us, growers are anxiously awaiting signs of a good Autumn break- something that has been missing over the past decade. In the absence of a good early break the signs are that there will be further stock reductions and a long winter hand feeding already depleted flocks.

Members who sold their clips in September and early October received returns which at the time were considered 'average', but as subsequent world events have emerged are now seen as much more gratifying. The current state of the market is most depressing and is contributing to further major adjustment in superfine wool growing operations. For example, a significant superfine wool growing enterprise in the region (and grower member since the foundation of ASWGA) has embarked upon a major cropping operation turning tens of hectares of quality superfine grazing country into cropping (Figure 1); while adjoining paddocks which once also carried superfines are now back-grounding scores of Angus cattle. Optimism is so high that three new silos have been installed even though the crop is not yet out of the ground and conditions are dry.



Figure 1: Sign of the times, this large paddock which until recently hosted some of the Region's most highly regarded superfines, has been turned over to a cropping paddock, adjoining paddocks are now back-grounding Angus cattle.

A further indicator of change in the Yass district was seen in the long-established annual Premier Superfine Circuit Sale widely supported for many years by distant as well as local buyers as a source of top quality superfine breeders from the Region's top operators; the last one in December was dominated by cross-bred ewes and lambs many from the same vendors who only a short time ago ran only quality superfines. Beyond the farm, the closure of the Goulburn Wool Scour is a further blow to the Region's wool industry interests. The scour had been renowned for early processing of many quality superfine bale lots including the Hillcreston 1PP bale recently purchased by AWTA to provide a new and the finest top against which testing equipment will be regularly calibrated. Speaking of AWTA, the closure of AWTA wool testing laboratory in Sydney is further evidence of the declining wool industry. Furthermore, sponsorship received by the Region over many years from the leading superfine broker will not be forthcoming this year. To complete the spectrum of wool industry difficulties, the up-market menswear chain of Herringbone stores, co-managed by the son of local member Tony Jensen is a victim of the times having been placed in the hands of a receiver. Growers, brokers, processors, service providers and retail outlets are all feeling the pinch.

At a Regional committee meeting in March, members had the opportunity to congratulate Barry Walker on being awarded ASWGA Honorary Life Membership. Barry has been a source of inspiration for local members through the ups and downs of the wool industry over many years, serving as National President during the difficult early days of the Association and retaining an active Regional committee member's role to this day. In contrast, the meeting was disappointed to receive the resignations of active past committee members Mick Mayoh and Peter Sekules. Mick had served as regional chairman and National delegate for a number of years and was active in furthering the Region's progressive agenda. Incidentally Mick as a Catchment Management Authority board member successfully represented the Lachlan Catchment at last year's National Landcare awards where the Authority won the National catchment award. Peter has been on the Regional committee for a number of years, most recently serving two years as Regional secretary taking a leading role in organising the highly successful Wool forums run by the Region in recent years; Peter also served as an alternative National delegate. The Region is indebted to Mick and Peter for all they have contributed and can ill-afford the loss of such respected members. While Peter has decided to hang up his head brand, Mick and his family will continue to produce superfine wool in the Bigga area. This renowned superfine wool growing area which once hosted an active cell of members is unfortunately now unrepresented despite having just experienced one of its better growing seasons for many a year. As this area is largely remote from pressures from urban interests and alternative land use opportunities are limited, superfine wool production is likely to remain the dominant activity.

The 62nd annual Great Southern Supreme Merino Show and Sale was held at Exhibition Park in Canberra from 17-19th January. The format has been extended to accommodate the expanding interest and increased exhibits. The three judges (Superfine- John Crawford, *Rock-Bank* (Victoria), Fine- John McLaren, *Nerstane* (New South Wales) and Medium-Strong- Jeremy King, *Range View* (Western Australia) were kept busy for two full days with an impressive line up of quality Merinos from across south-eastern Australia. Local member Robert Peden, *Bullamalita* was successful in the Poll Merino section winning the Champion August shorn poll merino ram (Figure 2). Prices at the final day's ram sale were down on last year with many studs not receiving a bid for well presented rams which in past years would have faced spirited bidding.



Figure 2: A nonchalant Robert Peden with his award winning August Shorn Fine Poll Merino Ram destined for Royal Sydney show in April.



Figure 3: Judge Jeremy King casting a critical eye over entries in the Medium Merino August Shorn Ram entries. The ASWGA information desk was given a bird's eye view of happenings.

The Region manned an information desk for the duration of the event (Figure 3), handing out copies of *ASWGA Annual* and membership forms to prospective new members. The presence also provided an opportunity to catch up with a number of rank-and-file members. The profile of ASWGA was further enhanced by the Chairman (Figure 4) being invited to sash a number of the winning superfine entries including the champion August shorn ram which was won by *Wurrock* (Victoria) from *Langdene* (New South Wales).



Figure 4: Chairman Goulburn-Yass, John Ive congratulating Paul Walton, *Wurrock* (Victoria) with his superfine entry sashed as the Champion August Shorn Ram. Runner up was the fine wool entry of Garry Cox, *Langdene* (New South Wales).



Figure 5: Members of Canadian parliamentary delegation take a recovery break from formal proceedings during a visit to Talaheni.

On 14th January the Chairman hosted a visit by a Canadian parliamentary delegation that only days earlier left Calgary with an air temperature of -40C to visit Talaheni where temperature was a challenging +40C. The objective of the visit was to meet with Australians who are developing innovative solutions for sustainable natural resource management, including agriculture, forestry, water and land-use. They were keen to share, observe and collect information that could be applied in Canada to achieve sustainability goals. Despite the adjustment required to accommodate the 80 degree C turn around, interest was high and the opportunity was taken to promote ASWGA (Figure 5) with complimentary copies of the *ASWGA Annual* in which the article on ecosystem services possible from well-managed wool growing ventures was of immediate relevance.

With members still mindful of the impact of the 2003 fires in the Region, many were quick to contribute to fodder funds for Victorian farmers affected by the devastating fires on and around 7th February. Member and local stud principal Robert Peden has offered replacement rams to any Victorian member who lost rams during the fires.

Evidence of the changing economic times was the securing of advertising rights for the televising of the 2009 American Superbowl, well-known for the world's highest rates- around \$3 million for 15 seconds and used over many years by Ford, Chrysler and GMH for the launch of new models. For the 2009 event, all three were outbid receiving no advertising slots. On the other hand, PETA successfully secured many slots only to have their advertisements rejected

because the content was judged too gruesome for prime-time viewing. Should we be thankful for small mercies?

The history of sheep in Australia is a patchwork of outstanding successes and heartbreaking, but thankfully shortlived depressions, so wrote William Gunn over forty-years ago (Munz (1964) The Australian Wool Industry). To the extent we are enduring a prolonged heartbreaking depression; the statement would suggest that we are long overdue for a share of the outstanding successes. Here's hoping the patchwork is not threadbare.