



# AUSTRALIAN SUPERFINE WOOL GROWERS' ASSOCIATION INC

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## ASWGA Goulburn/Yass Region Report

### November 2008

Since the last Council meeting (July 2008) seasonal prospects have improved particularly in September and October providing a reasonable Spring so far. The pattern of rainfall over recent months can be described, to use the business management jargon, as '*just in time with nothing to spare*'- although this usually conveys super efficiency, therefore perhaps a more pertinent description of conditions would be '*living on the edge*'. In some cases it has not been just in time and in others falling short; either way at no stage during recent months have soil moisture profiles been near fully replenished and the region remains drought declared with exceptional circumstances conditions still applying. While 'pasture' conditions are encouraging the long dry conditions over past years have taken their toll. With weakened pastures and decline in fertiliser use, weeds have proliferated- particularly barley grass with weaner and clip difficulties no doubt in the not-too-distant future.

While current seasonal conditions at this time for many are the best since 2005, the wool market is the worst for many a year. Although some early clips received satisfactory prices, the sharp falls in recent weeks are alarming. Ironically one of the reasons given over recent times for the uninspiring prices was the strength of Australian dollar against its American counterpart, however, with a depreciation of around 40 percent since July, wool prices have actually fallen sharply in Australian currency terms and plummeted in greenback terms. Generally clips throughout the region have been up to two microns broader than

the previous season with much welcomed improvement in staple strength and wool cut per head. Some quality clips were able to achieve this with only minimal increase in mean fibre diameter. Although sheep prices have held reasonably well for a period, the combined sharp fall in wool prices and a series of un-seasonal hot and windy days have seen the sheep market also drop sharply in recent days.

The region was saddened recently with the tragic death of Ron Clarke. Ron was well respected throughout the region for his astute judgement of quality in sheep and wool matters and was a sought after classer and adviser to many.

On matters sheep and wool, the outstanding book by Charles Massey, *The Australian Merino* (Viking O'Neil) has become a valuable collector's item, second-hand copies of the first printing (1990) are fetching over \$1000. While on books, the recent book *Beaten by a Blow* by Dennis McIntosh (Viking) documents the harsh realities of a shearer's life over little more than a decade of turmoil in the shearing industry. It covers the period of the wide-comb dispute and escalating number of New Zealand shearers. In the words of an official reviewer "it is a bleak book"; nevertheless an insightful read documenting the personal cost. With a shortage of shearers, at least through the Southern Tablelands and South-west Slopes (as witnessed by recent pleas on ABC *Australia All Over*), females are an increasing sight in the shearing shed, one such female shearer was recently featured in *Outback* magazine article on the wool industry. That same

shearer accepted a stand at Talaheni's shearing in August- and has been invited back next year.



**Figure 1:** A petite Ashly Crisp completes the final leg on another ewe at Talaheni shearing.

In September the region was asked by Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to host a farm visit to a wool growing enterprise as part of the program for a high level Kazakhstani delegation which included ministerial, departmental, agribusiness, finance and media representatives. Tim Webb agreed to host the visit to the family property Fairlight Station. The opportunity was taken to invite local press and radio media identities to report on the event furthering the profile of Goulburn-Yass region. Despite turning up very late the delegation was attentive to Tim's presentation which covered animal husbandry, clip preparation and animal health issues with a number of members acting as translators for those uncertain of English. Ironically, because of the recent cancellation of the Zegna awards for 2009, fleeces that Tim had put aside provided an opportunity for the delegation to view and handle top quality superfine wool (Figure 2). As the delegation was also interested in regulations relating to importation of Merino genetics (both as rams and as semen), Greg Weller (WoolProducers) was asked to join the group. As an interesting aside, the Kazakhstani media contingent (equivalent to ABC documentary *Foreign Correspondent*) recorded all the afternoon's events for a documentary for Kazakhstani national television; a bonus highlight for the film crew appeared to be the sighting of kangaroos on

the twilight return trip to Canberra which were filmed with great enthusiasm. Interestingly Kazakhstan, which abuts China, has a sheep population around 37 million with a mean clip fibre diameter surprisingly around 18 micron due to the infusion of Australian Merino genetics via Russia during the days of USSR- a source that is no longer available. Copies of the *fresh-off-the-press* ASWGA Annual were provided to those of the delegation who could read English and sparked a series of questions and comment on the return bus trip.



**Figure 2:** Portion of the Kazakhstani delegation engrossed in the detailed discussion on the finer points of superfine wool growing on the Southern Tablelands by Tim Webb, Fairlight Station.

Confirmation has been received for a number of events initiated by Goulburn-Yass to commemorate United Nations International Year for Natural Fibres (UN-IYNF) in 2009 (see separate progress report). Realising that the Henty Machinery Field Days host a natural fibre fashion and accessories parade, contact was made with the organisers prior to the September event to see if they were aware that 2009 was UN-IYNF. As a result, permission was granted to display the Goulburn-Yass ASWGA banner prominently at the parade venue (Figure 3). Discussions are now continuing to further capitalise upon UN-IYNF for the 2009 event, including wider promotion through fashion design courses at tertiary institutions.



**Figure 3:** The finalists in the Henty machinery field day's Natural Fibre Fashion and Accessory parade facing final judging on the cat walk.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November the region held a committee meeting to consider the Executive's response to the position paper developed sometime ago by the region. From this meeting four issues of common ground were identified and motions passed for carriage to next Council meeting, while a number of issues remain these will be tackled at a later time. The regional meeting also saw the formal resignation of long-standing committee person and previous regional councillor Danny Picker from both the committee and ASWGA. It is indeed sad, in fact demoralising that a member of such standing and achievements (locally, nationally and even internationally) over an extended period has resigned with such disillusionment. The meeting also heard for the first time of shearers refusing to shear unmulesed sheep or demanding they are crutched immediately beforehand for an elevated rate. With a current shortage of shearers in the area this is likely to become

an issue of great concern for some wool growers.

Reaction so far by membership to the inaugural *ASWGA Annual* has been universally positive and that it is a great improvement over previous arrangements. A strategy needs to be developed for using copies of the current annual to promote ASWGA; one such opportunity for the Goulburn-Yass region will be the Great Southern Supreme Merino Show and Sale in January 2009 when it is proposed to make copies available to prospective members.

The cancellation of the Zegna dinner and competition in 2009 has been disappointing to members.

Canberra was recently the scene of verbal hostilities with appearance of AWI Board and members before a Senate Estimates committee. The deliberations made national headlines with claims that the AWI Board is dysfunctional- with this charged and emotive atmosphere it becomes increasingly difficult to judge and rationally discuss issues on the eve of the Board elections and serves to further destabilise the wool industry at a time of increasing uncertainty for a disturbingly shrinking industry. Surely the critical point is that the Board should have the spectrum of skills necessary to improve the lot of wool growers, not be a popularity contest for vested interests. It is up to the membership to play their part towards this end by voting accordingly in the forthcoming election.