

EMS a winner in Yass Valley

A new breed is emerging from the Australian sheep industry, as environmentally and marketing-conscious growers seek new ways to make their product stand out from the crowd and respond to customers wanting to know where their purchase has come from and how it was produced.

Even during the tumultuous financial times of the past two years, high-end consumers have continued to demand product with specific requirements and woolgrowers have seen this as a chance for their clips to attract a market premium as their environmental credentials are recognised.

The big problem however has been just how growers could prove these environmental credentials. One solution to emerge is an environmental management system (EMS) using an internationally recognized standard to allow producers to measure these credentials.

The reasons for going down this path vary- from getting outside recognition and assessment of programmes and practices growers may already have in place; allowing them to differentiate themselves; using their status to better market their product and seek premiums for their product, as well as having the environmental standing to meet any future government funding requirements.

For others, producing an environmental management plan offers a chance to take their

work further, to work with other like-minded producers and to build on the work they have already done, stretching their environmental focus.

There are several programmes in the market place allowing farmers to gain external assessment and accreditation that meets international standards. While many of these processes are time-consuming, expensive and threaten to add to avalanche of paperwork already faced by producers some farmers have turned to a model they hope will be less prohibitive while still meet their needs.

The Australian Land Management System (ALM) System's EMS certification process allows farmers the chance to have their operation's environmental capacity assessed to an internationally recognised environmental standard without the huge financial and environmental burden of similar systems.



John Ive of "Talaheni" in the Yass Valley has won 19 land management awards in the past 30 years.

The system involves an externally audited certification process which shows operations have reached the internationally recognised ISO 14001

standards. The ALM process started as a paper-based system, but with a landholder dominated board with an eye to a practical approach maintaining rigour, it has become an internet-based computer programme. It allows growers to gain certification through environmental and production standards they have already meet, problems they may encounter and future issues.

Yass Valley woolgrowers John and Robyn Ive run one such farm business. They went through the ALM system to gain external recognition of an environmentally responsive management program which has led progressively to 19 land management awards during the past 30 years.

Mr Ive, who runs a 13-micron ultrafine wool flock on his property, "Talaheni", said looking after his property's natural resources underpinned his production and management. He saw the ALM's EMS programme as a chance to value-add and offer a point of difference for his already well-regarded Merino operation.

"The primary reason we started was to get recognition for one's environmental awareness, achievement and contribution, and by working with fellow woolgrowers across the country identify where we could go next to improve our environmental lot and with that, the need to remain viable," Mr Ive said. "We were looking for the next challenge."

When the Ives took on "Talaheni" 30 years ago, the most promisingly productive 23 per cent of the farm suffered from saline seeps, with the arable flats suffering the effect of high recharge from adjoining stony ridges.

Since then he has embarked on a system of managing with an eye to the environment.

"Achieving environmental gain is a necessary precursor to further production benefits."

A management programme which included the establishment of 250,000 native trees has "turned off the recharge-tap" on the hills and lifted stocking rates on the reclaimed flats from 2.5 DSE/ hectare to 17.5 DSE/hectare, in the process netting the Ives 19 local, state, national and international awards.

"If you don't have the environmental factors in place you won't achieve your production objectives, either," he said.

The Ives' would now like to see the certification process take a further step, focusing more on future management objectives which build upon recognition of the raft of long-term work undertaken by many participants in the past.

"We are small in terms of our numbers but quality is our focus. We pay attention to all the small details and we are not looking for the silver bullet, we are continually pushing the boundaries on all fronts."

"I am constantly considering where I should be positioning myself for the next decade," Mr Ive said. "I'd like to see our environmental credentials and other environmentally conscious growers recognised and then rewarded in the market place."

The TOP SIRE, Annual of the NSW Stud Merino Breeders' Association (2010) p.38-39.