

Stock and Land Group April Meeting

Ian Gill – fine wool producer/marketer

Ian Gill told the Stock and Land group in April, that as a geologist educator, he was able to successfully transition into growing superfine wool in sheds in the mid 1990s, by bringing his scientific expertise to bear on the project.

He is also an agriculturist because he graduated from Dookie Agricultural College in 1958 with honours.

He opted for shedding specially selected, coated, superfine Merino sheep and feeding them carefully to produce the finest wool possible. Only five years later in 2001, he produced a bale of wool that fetched a world record price of \$1200 a kilogram at auction. "Our wool was also displayed at the entrance to the Sydney Olympic games," he said.

Ian settled on Merino wethers for his operation and started a fastidious classing project to get the right sheep. Initially he selected for the consistency and fineness of their wool, the number of crimps per millimetre of wool staple as well as total staple length.

He said the ideal length for ultrafine wool tops - the cleaned, combed and aligned wool fibres - was 72mm. But that was difficult to achieve because while the length of newly shorn wool was often about 76mm, it could easily come back to say 62mm after processing.

Ian said it was also important that fibres be strong because the stronger they were the faster they could be spun into yarn.

The next selection criteria was how the sheep behaved in the shed. "Some sheep can't handle that environment, but most conform," he said. "They make hierarchies within the two extremes of bullies and timid ones. But we had to keep moving the bullies around the pens and that was half our job because most sheep continued producing quality wool for at least six years".

Providing healthy feed was usually straight forward but was a problem during drought. In 2008, he bought in straw from the Riverina which resulted in seriously ill sheep. Ian said that after some investigation it turned out that the straw had *Yersinia pestis* bacteria in it, which is what also causes the black death in humans. "We only lost six sheep out of 260 but that was bad enough," he said.

Shearing was done slowly by one shearer, local Keith Hammond, at the rate of about 80 a day. That ensured plenty of time could be devoted to ensuring the quality of each fleece.

Ian and his family became involved in processing their wool into yarn and clothing sold under the Jemala brand. Some ended up in prestigious Moscow stores favoured by oligarchs.

"But the Ukraine invasion put the skids under the oligarchs," he said.

We had to go to Italy because Australia has shut down nearly all its wool processing and there are no good spinners or processors of fine wool.

But a few farmers have started small businesses and they are doing well.

Mr Gill said he and Paul Simon, the boss of Woolworths, were going to set up an imported plant in Australia but found labour costs would have killed the project. "We found we would

have needed about 400 employees and we would have had to operate for about two years before we had anything to sell. So, we had to work away

We used to have our wool scoured by the CSIRO in Geelong who charged us about 10 times the going rate. Then we had to take it to Parkes to have it made into tops.

Wool is traded in tops which is what results after the fibres are combed and lined in one direction ready to be made into yarn and the longer those fibres are, the easier it is to spin.

Australian wool should be exported as value added tops and not as most of it is as raw greasy wool.

Mr Gill said the Chinese had clipped and sliced the genes of sheep to the extent that fibre length had been increased by 40 per cent. As well they are cloning sheep and cattle

In four of the last five years Aaron Rowbottom and family, between Hamilton and Port Fairy, have won the Ermenigildo Zegna trophy for the finest fleece in Australia. Last year its fibre diameter was 12.7microns. They get the weight of the fleece in gold bars and a big monetary prize from Zegna.

Mr Gill made a contract with a Chinese firm to develop what was called a Ruyi Merino bought Cubbie Station.

We made some of our shawls into ones measuring 2m by 1m.

Really struggling right now. One of the reasons is the oligarchs have gone to water, have gone greener. One of the best stores is Gruciano's in Moscow and he has five there plus another in Singapore. He started in Moscow at the age of 17 He has the reputation of selling the finest in the world and his customers are so rich they don't ask about prices and just buy what they like.

Loro Piana is an Italian fabrics and clothing company specialising in high-end, luxury cashmere and wool products.

Loro Piana used to buy the finest bale in the world always had a list of buyers He sponsored the Italian and European show jumping championships. Johnny Benglioni

Great difficulty in women's fashions because for example there are 20 pinks and you'll nearly always use the wrong one. We got \$1200 a kg for our wool. Then it has to be processed Luis Vuitton is owned by Arno who also has Hennessy also owns Chateau Yquem He doesn't even bother to process grapes some years because a small bottle of Yquem sells for \$200 to \$300 a bottle.

David Palmer

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