

GRASS Merinos celebrates 50th anniversary at the top!



GRASS Merinos directors and managers celebrated the stud's 50th anniversary last month at Armadillo Hotel.



Australia Wool Innovation's Geoff Lindon and CEO John Roberts, with MLA's Sheep Genetics manager Peta Bradley at the recent GRASS Merinos field day.



Current GRASS co-manager JB Tancred gave an update on the stud's direction.



Founder and business manager Graham Peart spoke about the stud's 50 year history.



Stud founder, Graham Peart's granddaughters - Avery and Phoebe Bellling.

By Lucie Peart

Fifty-years is business is no mean feat, and for local stud GRASS Poll Merinos its historic path to the top of sheep breeding has been filled with blood, sweat, tears and a just a little bit of controversy.

On Thursday, August 31, GRASS Merinos held a celebration of 50 years in operation with a field day at the Armadillo Hotel. Many current and former GRASS members, directors, supporters, and ag industry specialists from across the country attended the day.

Presenters included the CEO of the Australia Wool Innovation (AWI) John Roberts, who spoke about the challenges facing the wool industry abroad as countries move to adopt carbon-based and new animal regulations. He also explained some of the recent marketing campaigns undertaken by AWI.

"The lack of awareness about our fibre is breathtaking and some of the misperceptions about [wool] fibre, and it's sustainable characteristics is also breathtaking so, defending our fibre on the global platform is key priority," he explained.

Mr Roberts, who as been the CEO of AWI for six years, said the organisation had undergone a strategic review at the beginning of his tenure, focussing on attracting and maintaining the industry's current and future wool buyers.

"We looked at the fact that gen z's are going to be our biggest customer by 2030 and what we want to know is, what interests them and what's going to influence their purchasing decisions?"

"My first instinct when I hear the word 'sustainability', is financial sustainability. But it takes on a very different format when you talk about a gen z consumer, who wants something natural, biodegradable, and makes them sleep well. When we started the process of developing that strategic plan, we looked at those challenges and those opportunities."

AWI also advocates and works towards improvements in wool harvesting (such as shearing, new technologies and chemical processes), supply chain security, market dependence, providing support to local wool producers, and marketing wool to the world.

"The fact that it's [wool] a free range product - we've never spoken about it. There are so many things that we just do, and we've done for so long, which we've never really spoken about - are actually really, really interesting to your customers."

Mr Roberts said that data on a number of sources was also becoming a highly-valued industry tool.

"The more I talk to producers and say 'well, what if we could validate carbon sequestration through satellite imaging?' (which is already happening), and 'use a carbon calculator,' or 'what if we could talk about native pastures?', etc. I say, 'Give me the data!'"

Data collection and statistics also featured heavily in the presentation by ex-Gilgandra High School (GHS) student Peta Bradley.

Ms Bradley is the Sheep Genetics manager at Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). Watched on by a few current GHS ag students, she explained the MLA's new MERINOSELECT Indexes, highlighting the changes and additions of new indexes collected and ranked.

The index system is created from real-world data collected from Australian ram producers. It informs and influences the selection and breeding processes. It is also used to rank rams on a number of production values such as fleece weight, yearling and adult weight, and number of lambs weaned. The new indexes also include breech wrinkle, reproduction, condition score, eating quality, and other production system factors - such as costs.

"We (MLA) have more than 70 traits that we actually report so, indexes are a really critical tool to combine a lot of those important things into one single number to make life a little bit easier."

"Why do we need indexes in breeding?" asked Ms Bradley. "It gives you [producers and buyers] a filter to look through. Then you can also look at the individual traits you might be interested in - that are either in the index or in addition to the index, and of course visually appraise animals. Finally you've gone from a catalogue of hundreds of animals with lots of different traits to a short list that you can actually go and look at, on sale, and make informed selection decisions and purchases."

GRASS Merinos uses the indexing system, and in the 2022 drop (95,574 rams) the stud placed first across six of the seven indexes in the Merino Select database. The stud is no stranger to top performance and science-based

selection. As stud founder Graham Peart highlighted in his talk, in 1985 GRASS was the first stud (outside of research agencies) in the country to buy and operate a pregnancy ultrasound detector for sheep.

"While it's about sheep, it's the people that are more important," Mr Peart explained as he took the audience on a trip down memory lane.

"If you look around, there are two kinds of revolutionaries. There's people under 30 who strangely think they can change the world, and there's the people over 60 who suddenly realise if they don't change it soon, they won't be here."

"Luckily GRASS Merinos at the very beginning had a combination of youth and wisdom." Mr Peart explained that 50 years on, GRASS Merinos is able to celebrate great breeding achievements, and great individuals that have clung to the group over the decades to make it happen.

"If you think things are crook now, let me take you back to 1973. On October 22 (1973) a group of 22 merino breeders met in the committee room of the Gulargambone Bowling Club, and it was a crisis meeting - whether we dump sheep, or is there something else we can do." Mr Peart remarked that there was a fair bit of controversy and farm/stud politics that went on during the formative stages of GRASS - the Gulargambone Rural Association for Sheep Selection.

Eventually 10 producers from Gilgandra, Coonamble, and adjoining shires agreed to form a group, pool the genetics and breed their own range of merinos.

"We had advisors from CSIRO and the department of agriculture. They said if you do sound physical classing of your sheep and then measure, you will make about one per cent gain in productivity per year, but it will be compounding. They also wisely added to see not much in the first 10 years."

"Somebody else wisely told me if you want to be a successful farmer, you have to believe in 'patient capital'. I have been very fortunate to work on about 700 farms in my 40 professional years, but really only 150 that I was closely worked with. One of the great pleasures was to work with three generations of people with patient capital, who built up something worthwhile, but have learned to put up with the hard times," he said.

Mr Peart also praised the managers of the stud and spoke about the pleasing recent result of GRASS achieving the top indexed ram in Australia (2022) [and 16 other top rams].

"During the 50 years, we've only had four managers - John Gibbon, Greg and Dianne Peart, Callum Moody and now Alison and JB Tancred."

The stud's co-manager Mr Tancred, spoke to attendees about what GRASS Merinos is current looking for in breeding objectives and indexes.

He said the event's various speakers had highlighted the massive growth in breeding objectives and indexes in the last five to ten years. "This is something that GRASS has been doing for 50 years, and has been evolving ever since. I think these new indexes are going to be great for the industry, and it's showing that the work we've been doing has led to these indexes. I think it's a wonderful thing that the men and women of GRASS were doing them all that time," said Mr Tancred.

Other speakers included Agripath's Simon Fritsch, sheep extension officer at Trangie Agricultural Research Centre Tracie Bird-Gardiner, and Alison Tancred presented a session on udder scoring.

Attendees also enjoyed the catch up over the catered lunch at Armadillo Hotel. The day was a fitting celebration of GRASS Merinos and their achievements of the past 50 years, as well as an informative session for all sheep and wool producers.



GRASS director (chair) Ian Hamblin with long-time GRASS classer Allan Casey.