

President's Message – March 2015

Richard Halliday

The wool industry has been in the sights of animal activist groups again recently and there is much talk about industry needing to be on 'the front foot'.

It is frustrating when the hard work that livestock producers conduct day in day out to ensure the wellbeing of their animals is criticised by people who know very little about livestock, the practices that are undertaken and the reasons why they must be done.

Looking at social media and speaking to producers, there is a lot of frustration and anger over these constant, ill-informed campaigns. It's hard not to seem defensive when we know that the vast majority of wool growers and their employees do the right thing. Sometimes even the right thing can be cast in a bad light given current technology and worldwide connectivity.

There are two separate issues that activists capitalise on – the first being people doing the wrong thing and not respecting the livestock they are in charge of. The second is about the husbandry practices we perform to maintain and promote the health and welfare of sheep.

In regards to the first issue, if people treated animals in the correct way then there would be no material to broadcast to the public. It is important to remember that everybody has an obligation to intervene if someone you're working with is treating animals badly.

The second is more complicated – the lack of understanding as to why some animal husbandry practices are performed and the fact that there are genuine health and welfare ramifications if we don't. A photo in a dramatic setting or story told in a negative way can make these vital activities seem cruel to people who don't understand.

So what's the solution? I think we should talk about these issues in an open and transparent manner, every chance we get, even if it is a short conversation or a post on social media – put it into context for people.

A measured and factual approach, told in your own way will go a significant way to improving these issues. It is important to remember that by making a disparaging remark, getting aggressive or poking fun at someone because of their diet choices is only driving the wedge further and people on the receiving end feeling even more justified in their beliefs because of the sledging they just received.

To wrap up, a final comment on 'the front foot'. Growers have told us in our consultations that being proactive on activists is high on the priority list. However, as is the issue in the wool industry on so many topics and initiatives, there are so many versions of what the 'front foot' would ideally look like.

While there is some agreement on how our industry can proactively move forward, more agreement is needed on that messaging – not PR or half-truths but genuine reflection and proactive stories. This doesn't take one group or person to make a difference - it takes *everyone* with an interest in wool to do their bit to ensure others see us and what we do in a fair light. WoolProducers will continue to work on this issue. If you have strong views on the topic of activists email admin@woolproducers.com.au