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Love Merino

On track to bringing industry
back to small towns
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LOVEMERINO

BY JOHN RYAN
JOURNALIST



WHEN I drove over the last hill on a dirt track to get to the shearing shed at Glenwood, just a mile east of Wellington, I was amazed to see maybe 100 vehicles parked alongside.

I was early for Norm and Pip Smith's annual sale and wasn't expecting such a huge turnout, and for everyone else to be there two hours before kick-off.

But that seems to be the interest generated by the Soft Rolling Skin (SRS) Merinos they've been breeding in recent times, plain-bodied sheep that proponents say have an incredible number of advantages over their traditional wrinkly rivals.

"I'm very happy with the numbers of people that are here today and it's always exciting to be able to show off your genetics and see the improvement that we're getting year in, year out, it's great," Norm said in between talking to potential buyers about the merits of his various lots.

"Our drawcard is the wool whiteness and wool quality, but it's also about the easy care type of SRS sheep that we're producing and it's an animal that's comfortable in its environment and it thrives in a wet season like this, where we've had 27 inches of rain since they were last shorn in March and they're still beautifully white, to dry years where they've got resilience and they thrive in a dry environment as well, so it's about an all-round animal that's easy care."

Norm says his operation shifted to the SRS genetics aimed purely at improving wool quality but said that experience has shown the type is light years ahead of the traditional merino genetics.

"By taking the wrinkle off the sheep you make the animal more efficient, it wants to have more lambs, it becomes more fertile, it doesn't get flystrike as much as your traditional sheep does so it's more easycare so it's more comfortable in its environment and then what we're finding is that because it's more fertile it's actually more profitable for us because we've got more

sheep to sell, we've got a higher genetic turnover because we've got more sheep on the ground every year so there's all sorts of advantages, there's really not a negative about SRS sheep," Norm said.

"In the stud for the last five years we've maintained over 130 percent lambing, with our ewe flock we're consistently getting over 120 percent, this year we're 127 percent and we're now getting clients that are getting over 126 percent lambing, so it's amazing what the merino can do when you get rid of the burden of wrinkles, is what I like to say."

He believes so many buyers turned up to pay such good prices because of the bottom line advantages – as well as being great for the environment, he says the sums just stack up, and more and more people are beginning to realise this, making good SRS sheep a far easier sell.

Added to that, because SRS genetics largely eliminate the need for mulesing, it's a win-win, not having to worry about animal rights' groups knocking down the door.

"It takes a lot of that burden away and no-one likes to do the mulesing, that's one of the things that the pressure came on but it was something that's really easy to let go because it's not a nice thing to do anyway," Norm said.

Dr Jim Watts, SRS Merino chief scientist and breeding consultant, says this rainy season has put these genetics to the test.

They're plain-bodied sheep and when you look along their top line when they're freshly shorn there's absolutely no pin-wrinkle there so when they're in wet times there's nothing to trap the moisture at skin level and get fleece rot and body strike going – our sheep just dry out very quickly, even under extremely wet conditions," Dr Watts said, pointing to anecdotal com-

"I'm going to create a LoveMerino headquarters, a wool headquarters, not just for LoveMerino and I want to create employment and have the cutting, sewing, distribution, create a space in Wellington that is something for our town and our community 'cos we need to bring industry back to small towns."

parisons his producers have been hearing.

"Things like neighboring properties, one of our producers had virtually no strike in 6000 sheep and there were 2000 struck on the body out of the 5000 sheep next door, told to us by the same shearing contractor over the last month or so.

"The tipping point for us will be when people realise how much extra money they can make from much higher weaning percentages and growth rates and our young lambs and so forth and we produce just as much wool and a better quality wool, the whole thing adds up to more money for less effort," he said.

On the back of these environmentally friendly sheep, the Smith's farming enterprise has leapt in new directions based on sustainability, soil regeneration, 100 percent ground cover 100 percent of the time, native grasses, and also using the animals to actually improve the soil by eating the grass and then distributing their manure utilizing holistic grazing management.

Now a new chapter is unfolding with a company called LoveMerino set to produce high quality products from their own superfine wool, with the aim of getting as much behind the scenes supply chain happening in Wellington as they can.

Pip Smith said the concept has been on the backburner for at least a decade.

"We'd go down to the Newcastle wool sales and all our wool would get sold and it's beautiful, everyone loved it and you could never see where it ended up," Pip said.

"The Japanese and Italian and Chinese would buy however much of our wool and then they'd mix it up with low quality wool that should probably go into eiderdowns and furniture – they'd mix it because they had a price range that they had to stick to so they'd mix this beautiful wool and we always thought we'd love to



be able to trace our wool

"When my kids were little I used to buy NZ Merino Kids products and I loved it and said to Norm, we should do this, and because I love merino I thought we should call it LoveMerino," she said.

Pip says regional Australia has a story to tell, and believes that enlightened consumers will pay for the privilege of wearing high quality garments when they know where it came from, and how and why it was produced.

"We want to sell our story about holistic management, the ethical treatment of animal, the native grasses, the fact we don't mules and we want to grow it slowly, we don't want to become a million dollar industry overnight, want to grow slowly and keep it as a family business," Pip said.

"Having five kids, I want all our children to come back to rural Australia, I don't care what they do as long as they're happy and safe, but I think we need to encourage kids to come back to rural Australia because that's what runs Australia and there's been this drive I think that everyone's got to go to university and get these big jobs and I think we've lost sight, we don't need to earn that kind of money, you can live in the country and buy a beautiful home or a little farm or a little block of land and do so much for rural and regional.

"My idea is that we've got a farm, five kids, we can't

split the farm into five, we can't give every kid a farm, so maybe this is a family business that I can add on to the farm that maybe one or two of the children might be able to take on one day if that's what they want to do," she said.

Pip's consultants wanted her to arrange all the packaging and distribution and cutting and sewing to be done in Sydney, but in the longer term she says that's not going to happen.

"I want to, once I get this right, and I know I will get it right, I want to bring distribution back to Wellington, do it at home, and as it gets bigger I'm going to open a space in Wellington," Pip said.

"I'm going to create a LoveMerino headquarters, a wool headquarters, not just for LoveMerino and I want to create employment and have the cutting, sewing, distribution, create a space in Wellington that is something for our town and our community because we need to bring industry back to small towns.

"Wellington should be the Vaucluse of Dubbo, watch this space - Millthorpe and Rhyllstone have shown us that it can happen," she said.

The fact the SRS sheep are so resilient is a big factor in making the family take this gamble, another is that the world is demanding wool from sheep that don't have to be mulesed, so using breeds where flystrike isn't an issue gives the venture a running start according to Jim Watts.

"There's a live and active trade in un-mulesed merino wool in Australia now and we're connected in with spinners and weavers who are looking, as other people are, to producing un-mulesed merino sheep and they're very interested in what we've achieved genetically," Dr Watts said.

"As a group of 40 merino studs in Australia, we stopped mulesing at our first stud in 2001, most of them by 2004 and the last of them by 2008 and we simply did it because we didn't need to, it just meant less for us to do and the lambs grew better for market.

"These plain-bodied sheep that we're breeding are really resilient, fit, healthy animals, they produce the most glorious quality wool which we know for the spinners and weavers processes just so much better, and a better quality product and more efficiently, so in terms of our customers that we're reaching for the sale of our wool, it's un-mulesed, it's soft and silky and it processes into fabulous products," he said.

"It's the way the world's going, we're not producing wool for people to buy that consumers are actually the ones who are demanding non-mulesed products so that's the way we need to go and the industry needs to wake up and do the same," Norm said.

LoveMerino staged a Sydney launch last week, and will launch locally in Wellington on November 10, check out www.lovemerino.com.au for more details.