

## **A survey of the New Zealand Ram Breeders who use SIL Flock Recording Programme**

**Dr Jock Allison, ONZM February 2014**

### ***NZ Ram Breeders hold the competitive advantage....***

Meat is the second largest food export behind dairy products and New Zealand is the world's largest exporter of sheep meat. The Ram Breeders of New Zealand have continued to enhance the competitive advantage of New Zealand's sheep. Productivity increases in the national flock since 1990 are legend. Increases of about 25% in the national lambing percentage with a 30% increase in carcass weight combine to an impressive 68%, this achieved on poorer land as the nation's sheep flocks are pushed out of the best soils by dairying. The Sheep Genetics and Genomics group (SGG) at Invermay has provided the tools for much of this increase and we estimate a continuing 1% permanent genetic improvement per annum.

As the suppliers of 85-90% of all rams to the NZ sheep industry, SIL Ram Breeders are key industry stakeholders of the AgResearch Crown Research Institute and have close and beneficial working partnership with SGG. There has been no direct or meaningful consultation with the breeders about the transfer of SGG to Lincoln, probably in 2016, under the Future Footprint Plan (FFP).

### ***Breaking up a winning team ....***

The track record and strength of industry relationships of the SGG are among the most effective of the scientific groups within AgResearch. Many breeders have a close relationship with individual scientists and technicians at Invermay and disruption of this service is cause for considerable alarm. Ian Stevenson, President of the NZ Sheep Breeders Assn, which is responsible for the administration of 31 different breed societies says .....

“With the intended closure of Invermay I am concerned with the potential loss of expertise, as our Breed Societies have and continue to experience a helpful and friendly relationship with the Invermay personnel”. Further the Southern South Island and the Central South Island regions of NZ Beef and Lamb have sent remits to Beef and Lamb critical of the apparent support for the AgResearch FFP by the national body.

Implementation of the FFP will result in a big loss of capability. More than 70% of staff intend not to move and therefore service to industry must be at significant risk. The calibre of the scientific complement is the most critical component of any successful research organisation and coupled with established strong relationships with industry is extremely powerful. The SGG is a team that is greater than the sum of its parts. The cavalier treatment of AgResearch's Invermay scientific staff – as experts and as employees – suggests the lack of value placed on this key asset by the AgResearch Executive and Board.

### ***The formal requirement to work in partnership....***

Consultation with key stakeholders is of course the right thing to do. In the case of AgResearch, they are required by Ministers to do so and they state publicly “AgResearch is clearly focused on stakeholders and end-users. Together with its partners and collaborators, AgResearch will play a key

role in delivering the new knowledge and technologies that will underpin the future New Zealand pastoral sector agri-food and agri-technology sector” ( pg 4 Statement of Corporate Intent, (SCI) 2012-2017).

Such rhetoric of partnership with industry is throughout their corporate documents. One of their outcome statements refers to working in partnership with stakeholders to “increase the capacity of rural communities and enterprises to adapt changing farming conditions in ways that balance economic, environment, social and cultural imperatives” and one of their operating principles outlines that they “seek stakeholder consent for significant activity beyond its scope of operation” (AgResearch website). The SCI was tabled in Parliament, they are accountable to Ministers and tested by the Office of the Auditor General that the statements are true and delivered. Yet to date there has been no sensible believable reason given by AgResearch management to the New Zealand Ram Breeders or the farming community for moving the SGG or the Invermay deer group to Lincoln. Therefore a direct breach of a publically accountable and fundamental principle of the Board requires further explanation.

### ***An evidential approach to collecting views of ram breeders....***

As Invermay Director between 1978 -1986 and an AgResearch Board member from 1992 -1999 I was proud to work with the voice of industry. Many of you told me you didn't agree with the FFP move and given the lack of consultation, I wanted to know how deep the belief was.

Using the SIL database through “Breeder Finder” for each of the sheep breeds <http://tools.sil.co.nz/esearch/breederfinder>, plus the flock books for the Romney, Coopworth, Perendale breeds and the NZ Sheep Breeders Association Flock Book provided contacts and details of ram breeders surveyed and their flocks, the entire stakeholder group of Ram Breeders was identified (breeders with less than 50 breeding ewes in the flock were not considered). The 394 ram breeders, with more than 550 separate breed flocks was made up from:

- Southland, Otago and South Canterbury (41%)
- Canterbury and the rest of the South Island (19%)
- Manawatu and the Wairarapa (20%)
- Hawke's Bay and Waikato (14%)
- Remainder of the North Island (6%).

Once the identified, the steps followed to contact Ram breeders were as follows:

- directly through a petition at the Gore ram sales, 14 and 15 January 2014, introduced by auctioneering staff from our leading stock firms,
- emailed through the SIL data base which also drew attention to Dr George Davis's 10 reasons for the strengthening of Invermay see [www.saveinvermay.co.nz](http://www.saveinvermay.co.nz) and included a copy of the “Letter to Sheep Farmers” from the NZ Farmer's Weekly of September 9 2013 attached <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/f4c3b079#/f4c3b079/32>

- NZ Post to send the remaining 70+ breeders who did not have emails specified on the SIL database,
- follow-up phone calls to all breeders who had not responded to emails and or letters.

### ***A resounding vote for retention of scientists at Invermay....***

Through all of these mechanisms the proposal was canvassed: “That as an individual ram breeder I (we) do not agree with the present AgResearch proposals to transfer approximately 60 positions in the Sheep Genetics and Genomics group to Lincoln in 2016. They were then asked to vote for one of three options:

*Vote Yes: means that you think the group should be retained at Invermay,*

*Vote No: means that you think the group should transfer to Lincoln,*

*Vote Maybe: if you have no particular preference.*

This is a near unanimous vote from the sheep industry that they wish the Invermay group to stay right where it is, and that the shift to Lincoln has nothing to commend it. The breakdown of responses is shown below:

**Table 1: Summary of responses to retaining scientists at Invermay**

Number of Breeders	Yes	No	Abstain	No Response
394	363 (92.1%)	5 (1.3%)	11 (2.8%)	15 (3.8%)

NB: of the 5 No votes, one from Lincoln University, and one assumed from AgResearch.

The support was very consistent across all the breed groups – see Table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of responses by breed**

Breed	No of Flocks	Yes	No	Abstain	No Response
Romney	114 (+17)	104	2	6	2
Coopworth	29	23	1		5
Composites	72 (+36)	63	4	4	1
Perendale	46 (+2)	46			
Texel	50	49		1	
Corriedale	15	13			2
Dorset Down	23	21	1		1
Poll Dorset	35	27		3	5
South Suffolk	16	14			2
Southdown	15	15			
Suffolk	25	20	1	1	3
Others	68	59	4	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>451 (89.1%)</b>	<b>13 (2.6%)</b>	<b>20 (4.0%)</b>	<b>22 (4.4%)</b>

NB: The number of ram breeders is less than the total number of flocks. Figures in brackets indicate that some breeders have more than one flock of a particular breed specification.

Half of the 20 abstentions were from Landcorp / Focus Genetics and Taratahi Farm Training Centre who report to Government Ministers, and 7 of the No votes are Lincoln and AgResearch.

### ***In Summary – the NZ Ram Breeders say STAY ....***

This survey is a ringing endorsement of industry opinion that the SGG should remain at Invermay and also is an illustration of how far away from the wishes of their farmer stakeholders are the Boards of both Beef and Lamb and Federated Farmers. Both these organisations have provided what AgResearch has interpreted as industry support. AgResearch have held briefing meetings with the above farmer organisations and have assumed that counts as partnership and true consultation. They have assumed they are right on side with the sheep industry re their FFP proposals. Nothing could be further from the truth. Right at the sharp end of the sheep industry there is very close to unanimous support for the SGG to remain right where it is, and to be nurtured at Invermay.

The primary industry organisations have taken AgResearch at their word when commitments have been made that the science and service to industry will be maintained and even enhanced significantly with the implementation of the FPP. Without the retention of most of the scientific staff in the SGG, also in the farm systems and the deer programmes, AgResearch can't honour their commitments made to industry, and can be viewed as irresponsible in wanting to spend upwards of \$100 million, a substantial chunk of that in laboratory and office space which already exists to a very high standard.

From my own discussions with the AgResearch Board and Executive there is no indication thus far that any consideration has been afforded to alternative views. Such views come from highly qualified scientists and research directors who have recognisable track records of delivery of science and technology to industry over a long period. In addition the views of AgResearch's own staff reviewing the FPP recommending additional animal production staff be located at Invermay have been ignored.

I suggest that these staff have a better idea about strategies for better science delivery to industry than the AgResearch executive have demonstrated thus far. Certainly there is no mandate from the sheep and deer industries to continue with the FPP as far as the proposed changes for Invermay are concerned.

Pg 36 of AgResearch's CSI 2012-2017 "The ultimate judge of our success will be our Government shareholder who will, in turn, be informed by key players in the New Zealand pastoral, agri-food and agri-technology sectors, including processors, exporters, industry bodies and Government departments". Despite not being asked, the Ram Breeders of New Zealand, as a proxy for the whole sheep industry are a key player and therefore a judge of AgResearch success. In the case of retaining scientists at Invermay – the resounding vote is Yes and had they been asked to judge the success of AgResearch thus far – the resounding vote would be No.