

# Getting Value for the Wool Growers' Research Dollar

Hugh Hamilton

Member On-Farm Research Committee  
Wool Research and Development Corporation  
COOTAMUNDRA NSW 2590

The value of the Australian wool clip has decreased dramatically and as a consequence the funds provided by woolgrowers for research have also decreased. Woolgrowers are taxed 0.5% of the gross value of their wool sales for research and development and this is matched dollar for dollar by the Federal Government.

These funds are administered by the Wool Research and Development Corporation (WRDC), whose mission is:

*to plan and implement a research program to maximise net returns to Australian woolgrowers and the Australian economy and to develop systems for sustainable wool production and processing.*

heavily on reserves previously accumulated. At 30 June 1990 these reserves were \$75.4 million and, even though research funding will be reduced by 10% a year for the next few years, by 30 June 1995 reserves will be down to around \$10 million. In real terms the level of research in 1995/96 will be about 60% of research in 1991/92.

The Board considers the most significant aid to increasing woolgrowers income is to boost the demand for final manufactured products. It intends to maintain research spending on developing new products and more efficient wool processing. This means that the bulk of the funding cuts will be borne by other research areas including production research.

On-farm research and development is the area that I am involved with and includes the following research areas:

- soils and pasture management
- animal production and farm management
- animal health
- wool harvesting

These areas will be cut more or less evenly except the area of wool harvesting which will be cut significantly as the research phase on Automated Mechanical Shearing (the Robot) will be completed by June 1993.

The Board of WRDC has put together a vision for the wool industry in 20 to 25 years from now which sees wool as a high quality product in a market orientated industry. The wool industry will be economically and environmentally sustainable. As well, there will be total quality management and better information flow. This vision has led to the development of four major criteria to be used as guidelines when setting research priorities. They are:

- wool value enhancement
- fibre and product specification
- cost reduction
- environmental factors

In the pasture research area this would include such things as:

- manipulating or producing a better feed base
- more efficient fertiliser application
- controlling pests and weeds
- overcoming soil degradation problems such as acidity and salinity

The results aimed for would include:-

- well nourished, evenly grown wool of high tensile strength

The WRDC also aims to increase the demand for wool and is working towards new wool products, new or improved technologies for production and processing and for new knowledge. These outcomes will go a long way towards increasing demand.

The Board of the WRDC has appointed various technical panels and advisory committees who, with the assistance of the permanent staff, will select and monitor research projects. The Board also maintains close contact with the Australian Wool Corporation (AWC) and the International Wool Secretariat.

To meet their objectives the WRDC board must draw

- healthier animals, better able to withstand disease
- reduced costs of production
- sustainable forms of land management

The WRDC board has also placed a high priority on technology transfer to ensure that the results of any research reaches woolgrowers.

Selection of on-farm research projects goes through several stages under the umbrella of the On-Farm Research Committee. This committee has ten members; six woolgrowers, a farm consultant (also a woolgrower), two scientists and the Managing Director of the WRDC. As it is extremely rare for the Board to overturn the Committee's recommendations, this woolgrower dominated group has the major impact in selecting projects for funding.

Looking at the stage of selection in more detail. Firstly, a preliminary application is made and after appraisal by the On-Farm Research Committee a proportion are invited to submit full applications.

These applications are refereed by scientists familiar with the type of work proposed. The application is also appraised by a specialist technical panel with expertise in the area of research. These panels all have woolgrower members.

The technical panel assess whether:

- the applicant has the technical expertise and resources to effectively carry out the work, and
- whether the idea is innovative and will lead to further worthwhile gains in the research area

The projects are then returned to the On-Farm Research Committee. The On-Farm Research Committee assesses the projects in terms of benefit to woolgrowers and the economy and the likelihood that industry will accept and use the results.

Because of the difficulty in spreading the reduced funds as far as possible the results of the last budget meeting of the On-Farm Research Committee was to fund only 60% of final applications. Projects funded by WRDC are periodically reviewed and research institutes inspected.

Co-ordination of research is also being addressed in several proposals for cooperative research centres in which universities, research organisations and Rural Industry Research Corporations combine towards shared outcomes. Of course cooperative research centres have the added advantage of attracting additional Federal Government funding.

Finally the On-Farm Research Committee is constantly looking for ideas and input from groups such as the NSW Grassland Society in an effort to ensure that research is targeted at woolgrowers requirements.