

NewsMaker

Productivity growth essential

Agricultural scientist and sheep genetics pioneer Jock Allison has been recognised for his contribution to the New Zealand sheep industry. **Annette Scott** reports.

The inaugural Beef + Lamb New Zealand sheep industry awards held in Invercargill earlier this month highlighted the significant contribution of eminent Otago agribusiness consultant Dr Arthur (Jock) Allison ONZM, as he took out the award for an individual or business making a significant contribution to the NZ sheep industry.

His rural achievements are numerous and notably include the work he initiated with the Booroola Merino, which led to the discovery of the major fecundity gene that has been transferred out of the Merino type into other long wool breeds.

His work on importing the East Friesian sheep, known for its reproduction and milk producing characteristics, to New Zealand has been described as the greatest advance in the sheep industry in the past 50 years.

Allison has been an agribusiness consultant since 1986. He has a wide range of experience in the agricultural sector and is now mainly involved in the development and application of technologies in agribusiness to improve the profitability of the rural sector.

From 1978 to 1986 he was the Regional Research Director for the Ministry of Agriculture. Prior to that he was a research scientist specialising in sheep reproduction, and from 1992 to 1999 he was a director of AgResearch. He is now mainly involved in the implementation of technologies into new agribusinesses, improving the profitability of the rural sector.

Allison was modest about his recognition when he talked to *The New Zealand Farmers Weekly*, but very keen to offer advice to the industry.

Looking back he outlined how the industry had progressed over the



Dr Jock Allison, winner of the inaugural Beef + Lamb New Zealand award for his contribution to the sheep industry.

past 20-odd years as he recalled his attendance at the launch of the \$4 billion sheep programme by Meat NZ in 1997.

"The fact that at the time (1997) we had 47 million sheep and we were not attaining the \$4b target means that now achieving \$4b with a reduction in number to 32m sheep, we are doing well."

With sheep now dwarfed by the dairy industry and the pastoral land area for sheep markedly diminished, the industry was being pushed off the most productive land, forcing even greater importance on increasing production per hectare.

The release of the Scandinavian sheep breeds in 1991 had been a huge impetus for improving sheep productivity but Allison expressed concern over commercial gain becoming more important than science integrity.

Research institutes were no longer independent and it was becoming increasingly difficult to get "an honest assessment of new cultivars" in terms of continued improvement in forages and feed quality.

Having done some work for Germinal Seeds, Allison saw improved grasses as a big jump in pasture quality much needed in NZ.

But sadly Crown Research Institutes (CRIs) had now been set up to do science and to make money.

"Wrong model," Allison said. "They should be much more upfront with promotion of technologies which will assist farmers to produce more and more efficiently. This would produce a much greater return to the nation than the meagre profits that they make – \$8.5m before tax."

Allison suggested the industry itself "could, or should" in the future be more of a driver of its own destiny. "That includes making policy for all or many of the institutions which serve this industry."

Continued breed improvement with the pressure kept on to increase productivity must remain as a crucial priority.

"This is the resolve of the genetic experts but the pressure must be kept up to increase productivity and it must be considered how much greater pressure can be brought to bear to improve productivity."

Productivity and profit saw a 78% improvement from 1990 to 2010 moving from 100% at 14.4kg carcase weight to 120% at 18kg. An increase to 135% at 20kg would give a further 32% (134%) increase in productivity. Most recent prediction suggested an aim of 200% (272%) at 20kg.

"Poorer land would make this a real stretch target."

There was opportunity for further expansion in sheep milking based on productivity and profit alone. "Gross income of around \$400/ewe was possible in comparison with less than half that from lamb production."

Allison advocated that National Animal Identification Tracing (NAIT) was a solution for a problem that didn't exist. Money spent on NAIT could be better spent on science to

improve surveillance of imports into NZ where a considerable science investment was required to improve biosecurity.

Climate change "is just so much fiction". It was government policy worldwide and science did not back it up. It had been deemed to be important by government and the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) and the predicted temperature rise of 2-6 degrees was being planned for, as were a big change in precipitation levels and more adverse weather events.

"Research organisations, farm advisors and policy makers are all soaking up the government's money. I, just as all of the warming scientists, will not live long enough to be proven wrong," Allison said.

As for ETS, Allison was sceptical suggesting much of the rhetoric from politicians on ETS was nonsense.

"The millions we are spending to modify the rumen have almost no chance of any result in reducing methane production and methane isn't really a problem with warming anyway. It has a short life in the atmosphere and the world's ruminants are not increasing hugely numerically and there is much more methane from paddy (rice) fields and other natural sources."

At the current pricing level, carbon markets would not have any effect. While world economies were in deep trouble, there wasn't much stomach to undertake any expensive and doubtful technical solutions to emissions reductions.

"We can do a great deal about nitrogen and nitrous oxide (one third of agricultural emissions) and there is no disagreement that this should be a high priority. Methane however is fairyland, thinking we can make significant progress in reducing this."

The only way to reduce methane is to reduce stock numbers, and that is lunacy."

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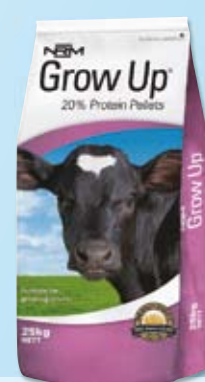
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