

AUSTRALIAN SUPERFINE WOOL GROWERS' ASSOCIATION INC

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ASWGA would like to thank founding member and Past Federal President Kevin Dunn for his research, compilation and understanding of the history of the Australian Superfine Wool Growers' Association.

This delves into the reasons why the Association was formed and outlines the progression from an idea to an organisation that enjoys peak body status.

The determination and commitment to follow this path, despite being a relatively small subgroup of the whole wool industry, is greatly appreciated. It has benefited growers, purchasers, mills and retailers.

We have tackled many issues in our 50 years - with wins and losses - but have not shirked from what we believe in.

The keeping of the Ararat Branch Minute Book provided invaluable assistance in portraying an accurate account of the early history.

There was special mention of the more significant contributors to ASWGA who ranged from growers right through to retailers.

Please enjoy this recall of the first 50 years of ASWGA

Mark Waters
President

ASWGA History Speech by Kevin Dunn delivered at 50 Year Anniversary Dinner 2022

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The word "History", for most of us from our school days, is synonymous with a jumble of hard-to-remember names, dates, places, events and people.

To many, therefore, it is also synonymous with the word "boring".

It would be impossible to talk about the history of the Australian Superfine Wool Growers' Association without using some of those terms. The challenge then will be to try to limit the "boring" aspect. The following covers mostly the early days of ASWGA, and draws mostly on the Ararat Region.

ASWGA began as an idea in the mind of sheep breeder Arthur Beggs, from "Buln Gherin", Beaufort, following some years of low wool prices, and the mindset of a few people in positions of power within the wool industry, that superfine wool had "outlived its usefulness, and no further time or effort should be wasted on it". Arthur disagreed.

After talking with a number of growers (most of whom thought as he did), he wrote a letter to his brother-in-law, Ararat woolgrower Dick De Fegely in December 1969, seeking support, help and ideas.

A series of meetings called by Arthur in key fine wool growing areas of New South Wales - Yass, Armidale, and Mudgee and in Hamilton and Barunah in Victoria - backed his ideas and in March 1971, around ninety people in Ararat pushed for work to start on forming a Superfine Wool Growers' Association. Firstly, by writing a Constitution stating the aims of the Association and secondly, by setting out a list of discussion points for Arthur to raise with processing and user companies in May and June of that year, when in his role as a member of the Australian Wool Board, he would be overseas and thirdly, to elect two delegates to a meeting of a Central Council after his return to Australia. The two elected were Arthur and Jack Russell from Nurrabiel, south of Horsham. A Regional Committee was also elected, consisting of Hugh Stewart, Rich King, Hugh Ranken, Kenneth McKenzie, Claude Notman and Jim Dyer.

On the 5th July, Arthur reported back to another Ararat meeting (this time to around 135 people) of the progress made with several key players in Europe, USA and Japan. Most were happy to take part in negotiations with a newly-formed group of Australian growers, with a view to increasing prices for the top end of the Australian clip, although pointing out that recent wage rises of 35% in the USA and Italy presented problems for them. It was to be hoped that some bridging finance from the Australian Wool Commission might be available to start the process. In between these two meetings, three important things happened –

1. A Constitution suggesting, amongst other things, four delegates from New South Wales and Victoria to represent those two States;
2. An invitation to be involved was issued to the already existing Tasmanian Fine Merino Breeders' Association;
3. A questionnaire to 900 potential members was sent out – 716 of whom replied.

The action next moved to the Theatre of Shell House, Melbourne where the first Annual General Meeting of The Australian Superfine Wool Growers' Association took place. The following people formed the first ASWGA Council. Arthur Beggs and Jack Russell representing Ararat; John Williams representing Armidale; Michael Darmody and Bruce Merriman, representing Goulburn/Yass; J R. Lonergan, Mudgee; Peter Kininmonth, Barunah; John Silcock, Hamilton; Rod O'Connor, Alan Cameron, R.W. Scott and Jim McEwan, representing Tasmania. (This requires a little explanation:— Tasmanian Fine Merino Breeders' Association had agreed to become part of the new body and had been allocated four delegates, to preserve the equity of each State. So with three States, seven Regions and twelve Councillors. ASWGA was officially off and running!

To jump ahead briefly, some years later a Region was formed around Albury-Wodonga, but this was disbanded after some productive years of operation, and members north of the Murray river were allocated to Goulburn-Yass, and those south rejoined Ararat. Later still, members in Western Australia obtained regional status, so today there are still seven Regions, albeit with some alterations in boundaries and names. Both South Australia and south--eastern Queensland have grower members (and there is one very keen breeder and grower in Devon, UK) leaving the Northern Territory as the only part of the nation without that curious individual - the superfine wool grower.

The addition of mill memberships, both in Australia and overseas has been an integral part of the development of ASWGA.

Back to History

Two further meetings of the Executive of the newly formed Association took place in September and October - the Executive having been defined by the new Constitution as the elected National President, (Mr. Beggs and three elected Vice Presidents, one from each State, (Mr. Darmody, Mr Russell, and Mr. O'Connor). It was proposed to put prices on 37 of the 38 top types on the Australian Wool Commission type sheet which, it was hoped, the Commission would then

underwrite for the duration of that season. (It should be noted that the elite type 1PP was not included.)

The actual change of ownership for these types, it was suggested, should be initially through the auction system, but by the next selling season this was to be done by either a small specific Superfine auction, by negotiation with buyers and buying houses, or by tender on a monthly basis. At the second of these meetings, David Asimus, a member of the Commission, and Jim Young the operations manager, having themselves just returned from Europe and Japan, pointed out areas of the proposals which they thought would not be feasible. Negotiations by ASWGA on behalf of the growers of Superfine wool to improve their lot had commenced.

At Ararat's second AGM in June 1972, the Chairman, Mr Russell suggested that we adopt a symbol for use by members – the origin of the present-day “rams head” - to be made by a company in Sydney, to cost \$1.50, and to be stencilled on bales. Much of the discussion during those first two years had been centred on what sort of a scheme should be adopted for setting prices for the top-of-the-table wool types, and at the 1973 meeting, it was moved that an agreed list would be presented to the Commission for their support at auction for the 73-74 selling season. Sometime between June and October of 1973, AWC had apparently refused support for such a scheme, because a Regional Committee meeting expressed disappointment at this decision and moved to recommend to members that they announce that they were not prepared to sell at prices below those minimums. A further motion asked the ASWGA National Council to explore all avenues to obtain financial backing for a scheme of our own.

Arthur Beggs organised a group of growers to travel to the UK and Italy in 1974 (the first of several ASWGA mill tours) and one of the things which the group was commissioned to further discuss with Russell Smith, the head of Allied Textiles in Yorkshire, was a letter he had written to the Association floating the idea of a “club” for superfine wool growers and users (interesting, in view of the much more recent “club” formed by the Italian company Vitale Barberis Canonica). Apart from a few very small grower-to-mill direct deals by individuals over the years, the early visions of the top end of the wool clip controlling their own scheme for transferring ownership and promotion, did not materialise to any degree until the organisation of contracts, principally by Italian mills, in the last few years.

Another idea from UK mill members, in 1975, was the promotion of swing tickets of items at retail level. This was generally seen to be a step forward, but turned out to be very expensive, and in fact, later, almost bankrupted the young Association.

With the generic wool industry adopting objective measurement at a fast pace, Geoff King moved, at the Ararat AGM in 1975, that the principles of visual appraisal be upheld for Superfine wools, something I supported very strongly on that occasion. The following year, the then National President, Rod O'Connor sent a notice of motion to all regional meetings, that our types be sold without objective measurement, but after what I remember as a long discussion, the move was defeated. The outcome has been a hybrid system of buyer valuing, still used today, in spite of many more added measured properties. Importantly, sale by description never became the norm.

The Australian Wool Corporation was once again buying a large proportion of the clip in the years 1976 to 1978, and the Minutes of the Ararat AGM in July 1977 record that Kevin Dunn moved that the Corporation be advised that the Ararat region was very disappointed with the down typing of ASWGA wool types at valuation. Looking back, this was part of a one-man war waged with the Corporation over several years.

At the 1978 Ararat AGM, we observed a minute's silence in memory of Arthur Beggs, AM, who had passed away earlier that year. His influence and importance on the beginnings of our Association cannot be overestimated. Also at that meeting, we heard that our UK members were not buying

New Zealand Superfine wool because of a deterioration of classing standards, perhaps a thinly veiled hint for us to keep our classing standards high. A well-known identity from the International Wool Secretariat at Ilkley, Doug Hardisty, spoke to the group on that occasion, outlining new efforts to promote the use of more Superfine wool in men's casual trousers, to replace the fashion trend away from men's suits. Over the next five years, Doug spoke to us twice more, with exactly the same message on each occasion.

In 1979, members from the Barunah region joined us for our AGM, with a formal amalgamation of the two regions, to become the Ararat-Barunah region taking place.

In 1980, together with Tom Harmsworth and the Melbourne College of Textiles, we ran for the first time, a Superfine wool classing course, and, after some years of running a fleece competition in Tasmania, the Ermenegildo Zegna Company added an Australia-wide competition, open to all ASWGA members.

Whilst all this was going on, and in the 40 years to follow, there have been many initiatives embraced and many battles fought, where ASWGA was either playing the major role or helping to find a way forward - with the interests of Superfine woolgrowers always paramount. To avoid keeping you here all night, I will just briefly mention a few.

On at least three occasions our end of the wool industry was facing extinction:- in 1971, but was headed off by Arthur Beggs forming ASWGA; in 1980-81 by Merv Mibus continually carrying arguments to the Corporation and the bureaucracy about Reserve Price valuations, and refusing to accept counter arguments and setbacks; and in 1995, by Barry Walker taking telling statistics to the mills and convincing them their future was linked to our future.

Among many ASWGA successes are:—

- Almost the entire Australian wool clip is now packed in Nylon packs
- The acceptance of the Australian Superfine Certificate
- ASF types in wool valuing
- Registration and protection of two trademarks, the "Ram's Head" and the Australian Extrafine Merino logo, which was used commercially for some time before being merged with the "Ram's Head"
- The use of the AEM brand in a test marketing program, run by Brenda McGahan and David Connors, with Sax 5th Avenue and Dillard's in the USA
- A pilot marketing program in Japan, overseen by Rod Thirkell-Johnston, and financed by contributions from 70 of our grower members, and in-kind contributions from some of our mill members
- A regular market report collated by Peter Morgan, Chris Wilcox, and Rod and Ian Thirkell-Johnston, which our downstream users regarded highly
- Melissa's weekly E-Updates
- Member surveys, for use by processors in their planning
- Major input into periodic updates of the AWEX Code of Practice for Woolclassers, especially in areas such as branding codes, the treatment of exotic breeds, and dark and medullated fibres, retention on the show floor, at growers' request, of show bales at the top end of the clip
- The addition of grower member numbers to the station brand on packs
- Exchange with WoolProducers of meeting attendance rights
- Retaining the iconic 1PP type
- Conditions under which New Zealand Superfine wool was to be allowed to be sold in the Australian auction system

- The initiation of our own ASWGA fleece competition in 2014 and an annual photographic competition for members and their families, starting in 2012
- Consultation with the Zegna Corporation about any proposed change to the Zegna Competitions, such as the addition of a protected section in 1998, and the Vellus Aureum section in 2002
- Support for other awards and competitions such as the Lumb Golden Bale, Ottens Premier Wool Cup, Loro Piana Record Bale, Cheil Award of Excellence, New England Ultimate Clip, and Itochu/Primac Clip Preparation award; plus numerous discussions with The Merino Company to try to put in place niche supply chains
- Peak Body status accreditation from the Department of Trade

There were, of course plenty of occasions on which our suggestions fell on deaf ears, or where our initiatives failed to achieve our aims, but it was always evident that nobody else pushed issues if we did not. If you grow Superfine wool, the only way to have your voice heard on any relevant matter is to be a member of ASWGA.

Any history of this organisation needs to acknowledge the part played by our staff over the years, going right back to Colin Woodfull (the initial Secretary when the office was based at the Melbourne Showgrounds) and succeeded by Tom Love and Colleen Egan. The latter moved with ASWGA to become part of Australian Wool Industries Secretariat, briefly to South Melbourne and then Bourke Street. Since that time, Peter Morgan, Megan Moloney, Maryanne Schembri, Bianca Heaney and the incomparable Melissa Mulley have been excellent officers at the Victorian Wool Selling Centre and currently at Vella Drive.

Each of the seventeen Presidents, now over 51 years have contributed in different ways in the face of different challenges, and the various skills of Councillors and members have added to the mix. Also, there have always been people from outside our Association who have been actively good friends to us and our work. At the risk of leaving out people who should be included, let me run through some names which many people here will remember:-

Firstly, Eliza Forlong, 150 years before ASWGA, but central to the whole concept of Australian Superfine Wool, then others in no particular order; Brenda McGahan, Malcolm Campbell, Peter Ackroyd, Count Aldo Zegna, Count Paolo Zegna, Mike Kuritani, Ken Fuji, Teddy Lumb, Tom Harmsworth, Laurence Modiano, Bob Jennings, Kelly Mills, Bob O'Brien, Don Belgre, Tom Towers, Chris Thierry, Rebecca Kelley, Tom Talbot, Tim Marwedel, David Connors, Carlo Barbera, Jim Konishi, Harald Menkens, Bill Waterhouse, Max Tully, Chris Kelly, Andrew Blanch, Jonathon Dyson, Jong Chan Lee, Peter Meakes, Sidney Sinclair AM OBE, Hyunwon Lee, John Colley and Bruno DeMattia.

The work continues. We look forward to the next 50 years.