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WOMEN

**PAID PARENTAL LEAVE, CHILD CARE AND THE AUSTRALIAN WOOL  
INDUSTRY**

A Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Draft Exposure Bill to establish a national Paid Parental Leave Scheme.

This submission has been cleared by the NFAW Board.

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## **Introduction**

The Australian Government proposes to introduce a national Paid Parental Leave (PPL) Scheme operative from January 2011. The objectives of the policy include achieving better developmental milestones for infants as well as enhancing female work-force attachment patterns. The PPL policy is complemented by the Government's policies on Early Childhood Education and Care which offer a year's pre-school education for all four year olds, special provisions for disadvantaged children, and access to financial assistance for the costs of child care including care for young school age children (out of school hours and vacation care services-OSHC).

Some attention was paid in submissions to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into a National Paid Parental Leave Scheme to the needs of parents and children resident in rural and regional Australia. Most discussion to date about PPL and rural Australia has focussed on farm wives - women who may not draw an income from the family farm business. However, little is known of the specific needs of parents and children in Australia's mobile rural casual work-force.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will address the specific issue of the wool industry workforce.<sup>2</sup> This submission is provided because of a keen personal wish to support the women in the shearing industry, and to ensure that public policies support them to be able to continue as valued members of the skilled workforce.

## **The Australian Wool Industry**

For the purposes of this paper Australia's wool industry encompasses pastoralists, shearers and shed-hands.

In the shearing shed the pastoralist provides the over-head gear, classing table and the like. The pastoralist is responsible in terms of shearing for having the sheep dry and in the yards ready for shearing teams.

The shearing teams encompass shearers, shed-hands, pressers, wool-rollers, classers, and cooks. Shearing teams are commonly managed by a contractor.

Once sheep are shorn the pastoralist has property workers responsible for managing the sheep- they may need dipping, drenching or back-lining, or rugging before the sheep are returned to the paddock.

The contractor is responsible for seeing that all shed positions are filled (described above); the contractor is the employer of these personnel under contract to the grower.

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<sup>1</sup> These travelling teams occur in fruit picking and the cotton industry, for example.

<sup>2</sup> The author is a grazier on the Monaro and has had ten years' experience working as a shearers' cook mainly in south Eastern and south Western New South Wales.



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The pastoralist provides accommodation for the visiting shearing team and the cook hut. However many shearers will bring their own caravans to the site to live in. In some cases the accommodation has been allowed to become run-down over the decades. The term 'the shed' is used to denote the period during which shearing occurs.

In some parts of Australia, the shearing shed is described as 'suburban'. That is to say, the team members live in nearby communities or on their own small holdings, and travel daily to the pastoralist's property. A cook may not be employed as part of such a team. In these instances, the owner may provide a meal. If not, the team are 'tucker-bagging it' in terms of food. Individuals may well drive up to one hundred kilometres each way, per day. Some may drive further.

Recent changes to the NSW Pastoralists Award have seen significant increases in travel allowances (from 25 cents to 75 cents per kilometre). This will reinforce the trend for a move away from on-property accommodation and the need to employ a cook as part of the team.

In more remote areas, (the out-country or back-country) the teams are resident on the pastoralist's property for the duration of the shed, which can be up to months at larger properties, depending on the number of sheep to shear. For example, a big shed like Boonook, near Deniliquin in New South Wales, has had more than 50,000 sheep to be shorn, with between sixteen and twenty shearers plus hands over a period of perhaps six months. During that time the team might have moved on to another shed for a short time, and then returned to Boonook for the later separate shearing of lambs, or rams.

In these settings the pastoralist is under greater pressure to maintain the standard of the accommodation and cook hut for the team. However, these facilities can be pretty ordinary.

Army barracks would, in comparison, be a five star hotel. Due to a lack of a united national contractors association the number of working teams is difficult to quantify.

While the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that in 2008-9<sup>3</sup> sheep and lamb numbers were at their lowest level since 1905 (72.7 million head), recent inland rains in Autumn 2010, and the increase in both wool and fat lamb prices will likely see the occurrence of re-stocking and consequent growth of employment opportunities. Rural shearing teams provide an important element of skilled employment opportunities in rural Australia, and the industry has the capacity to alleviate both the drift of population to the towns and cities, and to provide skilled employment opportunities for indigenous men and women.

Many shearers' teams include both women and men: husband and wife-mainly male

<sup>3</sup> *Agricultural Commodities, Australia, 2008-09* (cat. no. [7121.0](#)).

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shearers and female shed hands and classers (although there are some women shearers). Cooks are often, but not always, women.

Some teams include a significant proportion of Maori and pakeha New Zealand workers.

Employment of indigenous Australians in these teams is not high, in my experience in New South Wales.

The shearing industry working conditions are covered by State awards<sup>4</sup>, and the main union is the Australian Workers' Union<sup>5</sup>. Occupational health and safety cover is provided through relevant State legislation.

### **Implications of the Paid Parental Leave Scheme Introduction**

The men and women employed in 'suburban' sheds will mostly be residents in country towns and villages or on their own small holdings, but will nonetheless be likely to meet the eligibility criteria for the PPL scheme.<sup>6</sup> Their employer, through whom PPL will be paid, will in the main be the contractor. The women may already be in contact with or have access to locally based early childhood services (where they exist) and the local schools or distance education for their children. It is likely that the increased travel allowances in NSW will reinforce this trend in less remote areas.

It is common for school-age children of shearing team members, whether in out country or suburban sheds, to come to the sheds during school vacations because of problems in availability of school holiday care programs

The capacity to return to work after taking PPL or any unpaid leave allowed through industrial awards is affected by the availability of child care services. I have gained the impression that the AWU has not been particularly sensitive to the specific needs of women employed under the NSW Pastoralists Award.

The women in the 'out-country' teams which move from property to property commonly are accompanied by their young children, including young primary school aged children. Children can at times be in the actual shed, under parental supervision, or else playing around the huts.

Because this is ultra vires occupational health and safety laws, growers and contractors will deny this fact. Accordingly, it is hard to identify the numbers involved.

In my own personal experience I have been accompanied to residential sheds by my primary school age son when he was unwell and unable to stay at home with his

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the NSW Pastoralists Award.

<sup>5</sup> There are other unions with coverage in some States.

<sup>6</sup> see

[http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/proserv/paid\\_parental/parental\\_leave/Pages/AustraliasPaidParentalLeaveScheme.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/proserv/paid_parental/parental_leave/Pages/AustraliasPaidParentalLeaveScheme.aspx)



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father or a neighbour. I have taken my children to sheds during school holidays because of the lack of Out of School Holiday Childcare. I have cooked in sheds where in a team of twenty to thirty five shearers and hands there might in addition be four or more children including infants and young school age children for whom parents were not able to make other arrangements. During school holidays the influx of school age children might take numbers considerably higher. Parents working as husband and wife teams need to continue working together. I know of other women cooks who have moved with their children, living in a caravan, to work with mobile teams.

Because of the factors quoted above, it is difficult to make a reliable estimate of the total numbers of children who might be in this situation at any one time.

However, the fact remains that with or without a national Paid Parental Leave Scheme and appropriate childcare services there are and will continue to be a number of children missing out on early childhood care and education services, and potentially on primary education.

This should be of concern to policy makers.

Work in a shearing shed is extremely arduous. Where both parents are working in the shed each day, children play around and in the sheds, and fatigued parents have limited capacity at the end of the working day to supervise children in distance education class work. Some sheds will not have adequate electrical power for night study.

### **Policy Implications**

The needs of these rural workers for child care (including out of school hours and school vacation care) services will not be met by current approaches to the subsidy of child care places in rural towns.

Long travelling times place an additional burden on parents and services.

The needs of children of members of shearing teams which move from one grazing property to another will be met only through innovative thinking and development of trusted working relations with shearing contractors.

That said, in cases where the number of children of shearing team members might range from three or four through to ten, and have an age range of infants to eleven year olds, there may be a case for Commonwealth subsidy for a specific early childhood worker in the team. Such a worker would move with the team from shed to shed.

One consequence of such a policy could be that more shearing team members would bring their children with them, rather than boarding them with neighbours or extended family members. However, this could have implications for pastoralists pressured in providing appropriate accommodation and play environments.

It will also be important to review the actual take-up of PPL among these casual workers in shearing teams. Women are there as part of husband and wife teams in the main.

This review could be done as part of the anticipated Review of the initial operation of the PPL scheme.

Moreover, there is certainly scope for a changed emphasis in programs to expand the employment and training of indigenous Australians to work in the wool industry. (It is noteworthy that the northern cattle industry was opened with the substantial involvement of indigenous women as cattle hands- see for example the Ted Egan song, 'The Drover's Boy'.) In many rural parts of Australia there are few current job opportunities for women, especially for indigenous women.

In the case of New Zealanders (Maori and pakeha) many have been in conflict with the AWU because they often have a greater interest in maximising income and returning to New Zealand than in optimising take-up of the various improved conditions of employment which the AWU has obtained from pastoralists. There may also be an issue to be resolved of whether some of these non-permanent Australian residents are actually eligible for payment of PPL.

Some women who perhaps should, in the interests of themselves and their infants, consider taking a period of paid parental leave after a birth may not do so, either because it could lead to a decrease in their take-home pay, or because it is not likely to be possible to find a substitute worker for the female shearing team member during her absence on leave.

It would be of great concern if by making Senators aware of this situation, actions were taken which actually jeopardised the situations of these women and their children- they are currently 'invisible'- making them visible should lead to positive outcomes, not punitive actions. Attitudes to women workers are very conservative in rural Australia.

## **Recommendations**

That the Commonwealth should explore these issues further, including identifying differences between and within States and Territories, with a view to

- a) helping to resolve the shortages of skilled workers in some rural areas, to
- b) enhancing female and indigenous work-force attachment, and to
- c) producing better developmental and educational outcomes for the children of



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rural workers;

That the Commonwealth should carefully monitor the experience of transient casual workers in shearing teams in their take-up of PPL entitlements and improve access to appropriate childcare.

Dinah Coleman