

CHAPTER 14

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FAT TAIL SHEEP EXPORT INDUSTRY

14.1 The Committee considered the development of fat tail sheep for export because it considered that developments with ramifications for animal welfare should be subjected to public scrutiny. As Ms Townend commented:

'before the live export of sheep commenced, the issue was never publicly debated; it was not discussed in Parliament in a way that allowed the public to assess the situation and decide on the issues involved, and no forethought or planning was put into considering what the implications of a live export trade might be.'¹

14.2 The most important future development was perceived as the importation of fat tail sheep to Australia and the establishment of a fat tail Merino cross-breed live sheep trade.

The Establishment of a Fat Tail Cross-Breed Industry

14.3 The importation of Middle Eastern fat tail breeds of sheep, such as the Barbary, the Nadji, the Awassi, the Shafali, the Naoami and the Karakul, were initiated by Dr John Lightfoot, Chief of the Division of Animal Production, Western Australian Department of Agriculture, and Associate Professor Euan Roberts of the School of Wool and Pastoral Sciences, University of New South Wales, with the assistance of annual research funding from the AMRC. Three Karakul rams and three Karakul ewes were moved from the Cocos Island Quarantine Station to the Torrens Island Quarantine Station in South Australia in April 1985.² These sheep will be kept at the quarantine station for fear of the

spread of the ovine disease scrapie, but after three years, semen and embryos from Karakul progeny may be available for commercial release. In April 1985 Dr Lightfoot collected embryos of three breeds of fat tail sheep in Cyprus. These embryos were to be deep frozen and taken to the Cocos Island Quarantine Station for implantation in Australian sheep.

14.4 The second phase of the research project involved the cross-breeding of fat tail and Australian breeds of sheep in order to investigate carcass quality and consumer acceptability. By December 1984 a shipment of 299 Poll Dorset ewes had arrived in Bahrain for an improvement programme developed by Badam Agriculture, a company owned by Sheik Rashid, a relative of the Emir of Bahrain.³ The ewes were selected from properties in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania with the help of a past president of the Australian Poll Dorset Association, Mr Les Binns.⁴

14.5 The goal of this research programme was to assess the possibility of developing a fat tail industry in Australia for both live and carcass export to the Middle East. Dr Lightfoot estimated the potential market at two million sheep per year, which, it was claimed, would mean an extra \$100 million per year in export income. Professor Roberts claimed that fat tail sheep had the meat preferred by Middle East consumers. The claimed difference in flavour was attributed to the deposition of fat in the tail and a different fat distribution in the carcass.⁵ It is reported that one of the major Western Australian live sheep exporters had indicated that they would be prepared to pay a premium for Karakul cross wethers.⁶

14.6 The initiatives of Dr Lightfoot were supported by the Sheepmeat Council of Australia at a Council meeting in Perth in May 1984 and by Western Australia farm organisations,⁷ but they encountered considerable opposition from the Wool Council

of Australia, the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders and the NSW Live Stock and Grain Producers Association,⁸ who have advanced several objections.

14.7 The ALEA was approached by the Western Australian Government about the project. It supported the proposed trials but made no further commitments at that stage.

Objections to the Proposed Industry

14.8 Opponents of the fat tail sheep project have several objections to its development. There is the possible threat of the importation of exotic disease. Dr David Franklin of the ALEA commented that:

'there is a potential for a transfer of a disease under any circumstance. However, I believe the Australian Department of Health and its quarantine officers have looked at the matter quite seriously. The Department may not even allow those sheep into the country ... it would be on the basis of either not knowing enough about the endemic disease status for the origin of these sheep, or on the basis of being concerned about some of the endemic diseases that are there.'⁹

14.9 Dr Lightfoot argued that risk of disease was eliminated by:

- . careful initial selection of the sheep;
- . strict quarantine procedures;
- . rigorous diagnostic testing; and,
- . modern reproductive technology.¹⁰

14.10 There is also the possibility of fibre contamination. Mr John Barr, Queensland member of the Wool Council of Australia stated that:

'Nobody could give us an assurance that crossbreeding fat tail sheep with Merinos would not lead to the proliferation of coloured fibres in sections of the Australian Merino clip. The Australian Merino clip is the only clip in the world that does not have an inbred black fibre problem and it would be a tragedy to introduce it accidentally.'¹¹

14.11 The Western Australian Department of Agriculture responded:

'The proposal to use the fat tailed rams as terminal sires would mean that those progeny will be the product that will be exported and we already have sheep with black fibres in Australia and they do not cause any problem.'¹²

14.12 It is probable that the progeny would be exported without being shorn,¹³ but the problem of black fibre still applies to the breeding livestock retained in Australia. The example of pigmented fibre in Suffolk sheep has been cited. That problem is significant enough for Professor Roberts' own School of Wool and Pastoral Sciences to have devoted research funds to the breeding of all-white Suffolks. Dr Lightfoot has claimed that the wool from purchased fat tails is of 'classical carpet type' and would find a ready market in the Australian carpet wool industry.¹⁴

14.13 Management of fat tails has wider implications. The ALEA gave evidence that 'if the animal scours at all, you are going to have a fly strike problem'.¹⁵ This was confirmed by the ACLA which commented that new management techniques would be needed which would have animal welfare considerations.¹⁶

14.14 Management is also probably labour intensive. Mr Les Binns commented that:

'Young rams need to be trained in the difficult art of serving a fat tailed ewe and lambing problems occur with high frequency. Australian breeders cannot afford the time nor effort to carry out such intensive husbandry.'¹⁷

14.15 The suitability of the breed to the Australian environment is another welfare consideration. The ALEA believed that 'There would be only limited areas where the fat tails would be able to be held', that is, the drier areas of western New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia.¹⁸

14.16 Mr Ron Collins, President of the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders described the economic benefits of the development of a fat-tail sheep industry in Australia as 'unclear'.¹⁹ Mr Neville Gorman, President of the Wool Council of Australia commented that Australia already had enough sheep to satisfy the Middle East market.²⁰ Mr Peter Taylor of the N.S.W. Livestock and Grain Producers Association said that fat tails, if imported, had 'the potential to harm the present overseas trade for live wethers',²¹ although it is possible that fat tail cross-bred sheep would constitute a different market sector in the Middle East.²² Dr John Lightfoot argued that extensive market research would be needed to determine if a market for fat tail cross-bred sheep did exist in the Middle East.²³

14.17 Consumer preference in the Middle East for fat tail meat is uncertain. Professor Roberts claims their meat is preferred, that the physiological mechanism which deposits fat in the tail may give the breed a totally different carcass fat distribution and account for the distinctive 'flavour' of fat tailed sheep meats.²⁴ It is reported that Middle Eastern

consumers object to the smell of the cooking of Australian sheep meat, which Professor Roberts believes may be related to the distribution of fat. He also cites consumer preference testing in the United States in 1984 which demonstrated that consumers easily distinguished between meat from Karakul and Suffolk cross lambs.²⁵

14.18 Mr Les Binns, who witnessed breeding trials at the animal production unit of the Bahrain Government Department of Agriculture, claimed that although the sheep carried a large percentage of fat in the tail area there was still 'a fairly high level of fat in the well-conditioned, young sheep and a high level of fat deposited throughout the carcass of a well-conditioned, older sheep'.²⁶ He also commented that:

'The meat from a purebred fat tailed sheep has the same flavour as an Australian Merino wether if given the same feedlot or grazing conditions. The diet recommended to give the meat flavour desired in Saudi Arabia was barley, molasses and dates.'²⁷

14.19 The Committee has noted developments in the fat tail sheep project. There are important considerations of animal husbandry and welfare involved. In addition, the manner of the continuation of the live sheep trade must be considered. It will be necessary for government authorities and the various industry organisations to monitor very closely developments in this area.