

Scholar wants to see growers get the returns

EYRE Peninsula woolgrower Ben Ranford has returned from his 2008 Nuffield Scholarship travels with renewed determination to become more involved in the supply chain of the wool, grain and sheep meat he produces.

The Cleve farmer's travels to India, China, the United Kingdom, Europe and the Ukraine as part of his Australian Wool Innovation (AWI)-sponsored scholarship, have also given him renewed confidence in cooperative agribusiness ventures as a means of providing increased returns to growers.

Mr Ranford believes it is essential farmers understand what customers need if they want to be anything more than simple commodity suppliers.

This may mean becoming more directly involved in the supply chain and developing relationships with customers, rather than "leaving all that to others".

"It's hard to meet customers' specifications when you don't know what they are," he said.

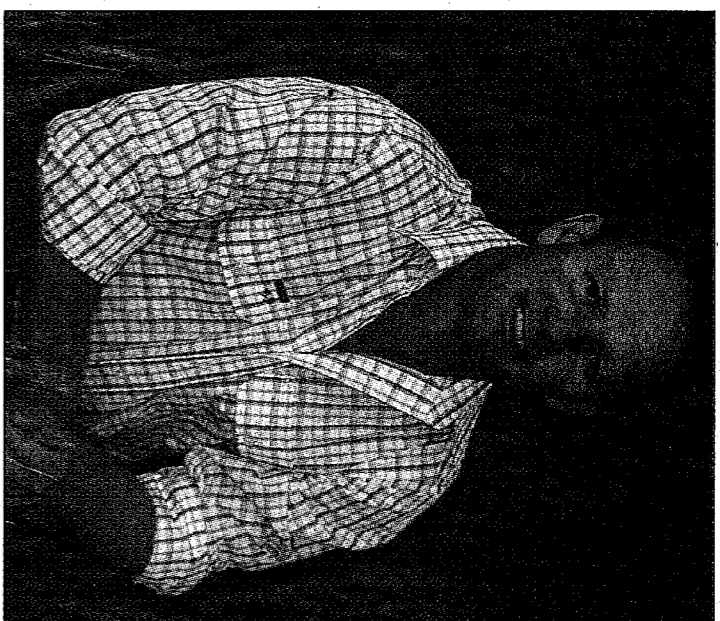
"I think feedback from customers is essential, and too often farmers don't get any feedback about their product at all, especially if they sell into a pool, or through an agent, and don't even know who the end customer is.

"It leaves farmers very much at the mercy of agents and buyers, whose interests are not necessarily aligned with growers."

Mr Ranford's Nuffield Scholarship was based on the not-so-small topic of how to secure a vibrant future for agricultural communities in Australia — a topic also close to the heart of his sponsor AWI.

He said rural communities rely on farm businesses and if they are successful, then communities will survive and prosper.

He said it followed that having a greater stake in the supply chain would help increase the return to farmers from their produce, with flow-on effects to local communities.



NUFFIELD: Cleve farmer Ben Ranford has returned from travelling overseas for his Nuffield Scholarship.

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Growers should get the returns

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And despite what he sees as the growing divergence of interests between traditional cooperative companies such as AWB Ltd and the farmer-shareholders they were originally created to serve, he believes collaboration remains one of the best ways for growers to aggregate their capacity to supply markets and have greater control of market processes and prices.

He says, as a grower, watching AWB's fall from grace has been disheartening, but his overseas travels have shown him some inspiring examples of grower cooperatives that have renewed his confidence in the principle.

Although Mr Ranford's travels have provided some inspiring examples, he said there had also been warnings about the need to ensure there was some reward for the effort involved in changing production methods or new products to meet customer requirements.

He said his own experience as a woolgrower improving his fleece quality from 23 to 21 microns only to find that the promised premium was no longer there because "every-one is producing 21 microns" — highlights that a better product does not necessarily produce a higher return.

"It shows the very real need to be more

involved in the supply chain, not just in producing the commodity, to ensure you are producing what the market wants.

"Aggregating production capacity through a collaborative approach can provide growers with more opportunities and a stronger position in the market place, which the individual meat producers in Wales seemed to be missing out on."

He says Australian farmers currently receive only a minimal portion of the retail value of their products.

Only about 1 per cent of the price of a design-

er woollen T-shirt, or a glass of beer goes to the farmer for the wool or the barley in that product.

"If smaller farmers are to survive we need a collaborative approach to supplying commodities and we need direct links with the supply chain, be it wool, grain or meat."

Mr Ranford said he was already incorporating the findings from his Nuffield travels in the development of new collaborations and market opportunities through FREE Eyre Ltd, an unlisted public company committed to the development of the Eyre Peninsula.

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