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## “Australia a natural choice for organic lamb”: Nuffield Scholar

Broken Hill grazier Garry Hannigan is no stranger to tough times. In the past decade erratic wool markets and a decline in the live sheep trade have seen the third generation wool grower diversify into African breeds for the organic sheep meat market.

Mr Hannigan maintains Australia is “one of the best places in the world to produce organic lamb”. His view was reinforced during a recent Nuffield Scholarship tour, sponsored by Meat and Livestock Australia, which identified lucrative export opportunities in North America, Europe and Asia.

Determined to expand drought-tolerant meat sheep populations in the Murray Darling rangelands, Mr Hannigan visited countries exemplifying high disposable wealth and strong or burgeoning organic food markets. His research will help to forge export relationships with the United States, England and Japan.

“While organic food is largely regarded as a luxury commodity in Australia, markets in North America and Europe are well established, and the Asian market is growing,” Mr Hannigan says. “Health, ahead of environmental awareness, is the major motivator for organic consumers overseas.”

Demand for organic lamb abroad is outstripping supply and Mr Hannigan predicts the domestic market will move in the same direction. In 2004 the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry reported Australia’s organic lamb market was growing at 30 per cent per annum, with more than 50 per cent of producers proposing increased production. The sector is carving a stronger niche within Australia’s \$1 billion lamb meat industry.

The volatility of supply and demand, organic conversion periods and distance to certified processors have been cited as barriers to the sector’s domestic expansion. However Mr Hannigan is confident that conditions in the NSW outback and a growing number of organic processing facilities will enable Australian producers to breed for major shortfall periods.

“Conventional lambing is seasonal but in the rangelands we can rear African breeds to produce twice as many lambs for the four-month shortfall abroad,” he says.

The farmer’s own success is testament to the environment’s suitability for organic agriculture. Churinga Station, a 50,000 hectare grazing operation, carries 3000 Damara x Dorper ewes producing organic lamb for the domestic meat market and 2000 Merino x Dorper ewes for the organic wool and lamb market.

The exotic sheep are efficient meat growers, shed their own coats, use their tails as a drought reserve and cope in harsh environments (Churinga Station receives an average rainfall of 178mm).

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“Diversification has enabled me to conservatively stock the land (one sheep per eight hectares) across 90 per cent of the property, which protects the diverse range of native vegetation that gives the lamb its unique flavour,” Mr Hannigan says.

“Effectively, I’m producing a world-class product in harmony with the unspoilt environment. There are no internal parasites, chemicals or fertilisers here – the Australian outback is one of few places in the world where farmers can operate organically without risking a production loss.”

It took the Nuffield Scholar three years to become fully certified with both the Biological Farmers of Australia and the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Organic Program, but the move has delivered triple bottom line benefits.

“The organic auditing process facilitates supply chain quality control and traceability from paddock to plate, farming practices are environmentally sustainable and I’m receiving a 25 to 30 per cent premium for my lamb,” Mr Hannigan says.

“Export potential in the US, UK and Asian organic lamb markets is growing – maintaining quality supply year-round is the challenge. However with more producers, and finishing farms to guarantee consistency during tough years like this one, we could do it.

“About 30 organic lamb producers have sprung up in the Murray Darling region in the last three years and I believe this will increase to meet overseas demand.”

The Organic Meat Company, a commercial brand of meat exporter Sanger Australia, reports 30 to 40 per cent growth in domestic and international markets in recent years.

Marketing Manager Alister Ferguson says the company is “growing the sector as supply dictates” to meet a 12-month product supply demand, particularly to the US and Asia. “The markets will be there to absorb supply as it increases – we are always looking for quality producers,” he says.

MLA’s On-Farm Supply Chain Manager, Blair Brice, says mounting interest from producers has prompted a preliminary investigation into domestic and export markets for alternative red meat production systems, including organic.

MLA’s approach is expected to involve national collaborative research and development with other RDCs, departments of primary industry, certifying bodies and organisations working in established supply chains to deliver a producers’ guide to alternative meat production. The resource will help producers to accurately assess production options when considering new markets.

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## 2007 NUFFIELD SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS OPEN

Meat and livestock producers from across Australia have the opportunity to extend their knowledge overseas as 2007 recipients of Australia’s most prestigious agricultural award – the Nuffield Australia Scholarship. Winners will be selected based on agricultural and leadership capabilities, and their potential to make a strong contribution to the future of Australian agriculture. Each Australian scholarship is valued at \$25,000 and is supported by leading Australian commodity, agribusiness and philanthropic organisations.

Applications open on April 1 and close on June 30, 2007. Application forms are available from the Nuffield Australia office on 02 6964 6600, [enquiries@nuffield.com.au](mailto:enquiries@nuffield.com.au) or on the website: [www.nuffield.com.au](http://www.nuffield.com.au)

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