

# Lamb Pitcher strikes out

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**M**ERINO lambs have not been surgically mulesed on one Victorian property near Skipton since 2007.

And their owner, Alan Pitcher, has no intention of resuming the fly strike prevention practice in the short term, and most likely, never.

"I have not had one sheep struck," the mixed farmer who joins more than 3500 Merino ewes annually on his 700 millimetre average rainfall property, "Naniamia", said of his experience.

While Mr Pitcher said he still believed surgical mulesing was the most comprehensive strategy to combat fly strike, he said the main reason he chose to stop the practice was to answer the calls for certified non-mulesed wool from the marketplace.

"You've got to listen to what the market is asking. If we don't listen to the people who are buying it (wool), then we will end up losing the industry," he said.

Sheep Genetics Australia (SGA) recommends Merino producers use Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) to help them breed for plain-bodied sheep that are less prone to fly strike.

According to SGA research, there are no technical impediments to creating a far more naturally fly strike-resistant Australian Merino flock.

The science says breeding for plainer bodies can be done relatively fast, and without compromising wool type or fleece weight, according to Sam Gill of SGA.

A Soft Rolling Skin (SRS) survey of 200 commercial SRS producers, conducted in 2005, found 30 per cent had stopped mulesing and another 30pc intended to stop in the near future.

None of the 40 SRS Merino studs mules, and agree not to do so as part of the SRS quality standard.

Not all breeders and wool producers want to follow the SRS route, but Mr Gill observes that anybody can breed for plainer bodied sheep using the genetic tools and the knowledge openly available via SGA.

SGA released an "early breech wrinkle" ASBV to the industry in September last year, and in the past six months has seen a 300pc increase in the collection of on-farm information to help validate the breeding value.

Mr Gill said changing wrinkle at one end of an animal had the same effect at the other end, making breech wrinkle a de-facto measure of the animal's body type.

Two legends have stood in the way of more widespread acceptance of plain-bodied sheep: that they cut less wool, and they can't produce certain wools like "traditional" superfine.

There is some truth to both stories, Mr Gill said, but the more overwhelming fact is any downside can be selected out by skilled breeders.

"The relationship between reducing fibre diameter and reducing fleece weight is twice as strong as the relationship between plain-bodied sheep and light fleece weight," he said.

"It's harder to increase fleece weight and reduce micron than it is to increase fleece weight and reduce wrinkle."

Producing "traditional" wool from plain-bodied sheep has been proven possible in the New England region, a superfine stronghold, and other areas, Mr Gill said.

Later this year, SGA plans to release a breeding value to help producers select away from sheep with a tendency for daggy backsides – another strike against the blowfly.

Further out, because it is genetically more complicated, SGA hopes to deliver an ASBV for bare breeches.

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Victoria, with their mixed-