

Exciting future for the Merino

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Four Merino breeders from NSW are among 20 participants from Australia's six Merino breeding States who have been selected to undertake a national leadership course, in Clare, SA, this week.

They are James Armstrong, 25, Cassilis Park, Cassilis; Matthew Coddington, Roseville Park, Dubbo; Stephen Lindsay, 33, Cora Lynn, Peak Hill; and Ben Watts, 32, Bralca, "Waidup Homestead", Molong.

The promotion and nurturing of future leaders of Australia's Merino sheep and wool industry is one aim of the course, an initiative of the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders AASMB).

The course is sponsored by National Australia Bank Agribusiness (NAB) and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) with funding also provided by FarmBi\$.

Young Merino industry participants from the six Merino breeding States of Australia have been selected to take part in this four-day course which will develop their leadership skills while giving them a better understanding of the various processes involved in leadership.

Conducted by Rural Directions Pty Ltd, the course will give each young breeder a valuable networking opportunity and a chance to expand their profile and advocacy role in the Australian Merino industry.

President of the AASMB, Will Roberts said, "The passion and commitment already displayed by these young people promises an exciting future for the Merino industry."

Aged between 21 and 35, participants also include, Michael Nicholas and George Gatenby (Tas); Matthew Fiebig, James Sullivan, Adam Willis and Michael Mortiz (SA); Steven Bolt, Courtney Sutherland, Peter Whitfield and Nathan King (WA); Catherine and Candice Roberts (Qld); James Collins, Penny Phillips, Trent Carter and Sam Thring (Vic).

Mr Roberts said, "This is our second biennial National Leadership course and with the generous sponsorship and collaboration of Australian Wool Innovation, NAB Agribusiness, FarmBi\$ and Rural Directions I am confident that at the course's conclusion these talented and promising individuals will be in a position to develop an action plan to further their leadership roles in the industry.

"For a number of participants who have already taken on leadership roles within industry, the course provides the opportunity to enhance their skills and the goals they have set for themselves."

Topics covered by the leadership course include entrepreneurship, decision-making, public speaking, media management, conflict resolution and corporate governance.

NSW Leaders

A short profile follows of the four nominees who have been selected by the SMBA to represent NSW with a very brief summary of the two issues they perceive to be most critical in the industry, along with their vision.

James Armstrong, 25, has recently returned to the family Merino stud, Cassilis Park, Cassilis, after being employed by Charles Mill (Uardry) Pty Ltd, Hay, for the past three years, latterly as stud overseer.

In 2004 he completed a degree in Agricultural Science at the University of Sydney, majoring in Animal Production and wrote his thesis on "Examining Wool Follicle Development in Merino Sheep Skin." A member of the Hay Sheep Show committee, he has also judged recently at a number of area shows.

While James sees the Merino industry as a complex one, he believes that the two most crucial issues presently impacting on the industry are wool marketing and the pressures on the industry of prolonged drought. Not only does he see a need to generate effective product marketing but also campaigns that combat the negatives of issues such as animal welfare and mulesing.

His vision is to have an industry that attracts the younger generation with confidence, is not shackled by tradition and inefficiencies along the production chain, and that can supply an innovative and fresh product that is directly inline with consumer desire.

Matthew Coddington, 34, is a stud Merino breeder with his wife, Cherie, on their Roseville Park Merino stud of 1950ha, south of Dubbo. He is active on a number of industry bodies including the Sheep Genetics Advisory Group and has served as industry

representative on several boards as well as having been a successful 2007 DAFF Pathways to Rural Leadership Course applicant.

Matthew sees the two most critical issues facing the industry as the rural skills shortage and lack of research on the impact of climate change, this latter including water resource management, drought resistant plant species and farming system innovations to ensure that the rural industry can remain viable for the next generation.

He would like to see a truly professionally run industry, conducted as a business, a focussed and innovative entity that is not held back by tradition. He would also like to see fixed price contracts, greater information sharing, alliances with other countries, wool bodies and retailers, and better labelling of quality products.

Stephen Lindsay, 33, is assistant manager of his family's Cora Lynn Merino stud at Peak Hill, a mixed grazing and cropping enterprise with Merino breeding the prime focus. He is also a member of the Peak Hill Show Society, the MidState Merino Field Days and the Dubbo National Ram Sale Association.

The critical issues that Stephen sees in the industry are those of mulesing and fibre contamination. While he sees a number of contributing problems to either side of the mulesing debate he also offers suggestions to address this issue, such as lobbying for subsidies or price reductions in currently available products; grower education and further trials of new and alternative options; and education on the 'green' benefits of the Merino.

Grower education is also a facet of the solutions Stephen sees to the problem of fibre contamination.

Ultimately, Stephen would like to see an industry that continues to grow as a highly regarded, united, results-focused, highly educated and driven industry.

Ben Watts, 32, is a stud Merino breeder from Molong who recently registered his stud, Bralca. Ben also works off-farm running commercial properties. In 2005, while managing a 3500 head fine wool breeding programme, he refined a management programme to produce quality wool to suit specific mill orders at premium prices, travelling to Italy to further his knowledge. Ben's mix of stud breeding and the input of woollen mills mixed with commercial operations allow him to see both sides of our industry.

Since 2001 he has represented the Australian industry on the board of the World Sheep and Wool Congress and was instrumental in placing Australia's successful bid for the conduct of the 2010 World Sheep and Wool Congress to be held in Australia.

Ben sees the lack of marketing in premium retail sectors and a need to increase education on production trends and efficiencies as two industry challenges.

Ben's vision for the industry would see one that is ultimately both financially and environmentally sustainable, and that provides consistent returns to growers through stable prices and demand.