

## **WA pastoralists take on the 'clean, green' challenge**

Meeting customer demands is the key to success in most industries. These days, agriculture is no different. Whilst for many producers satisfying customers requirements can be challenging, for several West Australian pastoralists it comes naturally...

Market research suggests that a growing number of consumers are concerned about the safety, and environmental credentials, of the goods they purchase. As this concern extends to food and fibre products, producers are rapidly being required to demonstrate that they are turning out safe products using environmentally responsible practices. They are being confronted with a 'clean, green' challenge.

When it comes to food and fibre production, things do not get much 'cleaner or greener' than in the Western Australian rangelands. Cattle, sheep and goats graze freely on native pastures that have been untouched by pesticides, fertilisers or herbicides. The inherently natural characteristics of the rangelands place pastoralists in an ideal position to differentiate their goods along 'clean, green' lines. This is an opportunity that will not escape the managers of Minilya, Challa and Winderie, three pastoral properties in the Gascoyne-Murchison region of Western Australia.

As Geoff Eliot from Minilya - a beef-cattle lease managed by Carpenter Agriculture - says: "The world wants clean, green products from intact-environments. The rangelands are best placed to meet this demand."

John Dowden whose family has been producing merino sheep and wool on Challa Station for over a century agrees: "We have to make the most of all the natural advantages we have, like our management of the environment. This is where our market edge is. We don't use any chemicals on our pastures; this is basically a natural production system. "

With funding from the Natural Heritage Trust, Geoff, John and Elaine Kempton - who runs boer and domesticated goats on Winderie Station – have set out to verify and promote their 'clean, green' image using quality assurance and environmental management systems. Quality assurance systems provide an independent verification of product safety and quality; where as environmental management systems provide evidence of a commitment to responsible environmental management.

After assessing the benefits of a number of different systems, the managers opted to develop SQF 1000<sup>CM</sup> quality assurance systems for their properties. SQF 1000<sup>CM</sup> is a quality assurance code that enables producers of low-risk products to demonstrate compliance with food safety standards and customer quality requirements. Although SQF 1000<sup>CM</sup> does not deal with environmental issues, the managers used the hazard identification and management processes specified in the code to develop environmental management systems.

At times, mustering, shearing, fencing and other everyday activities of station life made developing the systems quite a challenge. However, it is now almost a year on and the systems for each station are essentially complete. The next step? An independent audit. Although audits are never a popular idea, the managers are keen to have their systems checked over. As Geoff sees it: "It is important to have our systems independently audited and certified to give our claims credibility."

Once their systems have been audited, Geoff, John and Elaine will have a solid foundation from which to launch a credible 'clean, green' marketing program. The 'quality' component of their SQF 1000<sup>CM</sup> systems enables them to promote the fact that their products are 'clean', whilst the 'environmental' component proves they are committed to responsible rangeland management and the production of 'green' goods.

With her management system in place, Elaine feels better equipped to tackle the 'clean, green' challenge. "We all need to be aware of market needs and environmental conditions. We will need assurance systems in the near future to market our animals," she said.

Geoff agrees: "It is essential that producers become involved in these sorts of systems, if they don't, they will soon get left behind..."