**Queensland Government**

**Department of Agriculture and Fisheries**

**Media Release**

19 December 2016

**Sheep producer believes innovation key to industry’s future**

Innovative development and connecting people are key to the future of the Queensland sheep and wool industry, according to producer Pru Barkla.

Mrs Barkla and her husband Stuart, run two properties, Mt Molar at Clifton on the Darling Downs and Rosscoe Downs at Cunnamulla and she is one of the newest members of Queensland’s Leading Sheep Southern Regional Co-ordinating Committee.

Leading Sheep is a proactive network of the state’s sheep and wool businesses with a goal of equipping progressive producers with knowledge, skills and the latest technology so they can increase their long-term productivity and profitability.

“My motivation for joining the regional co-ordinating committee came from a desire to see more people within the industry connecting and sharing ideas, as well as being informed about new technology and innovations,” Mrs Barkla said.

“What we have found is producers want to be involved in programs, such as Leading Sheep, because they want to know more about advances in the industry.

“Even though they are busy in a day-to-day way on their properties, they are prepared to take time out to learn and we have seen this reflected in increased attendance numbers at Leading Sheep field days.”

The Barkla’s bought Rosscoe 40 years ago and have transitioned from running Merinos and a few Border Leicesters to a pure South African Meat Merinos (SAMM) Flock.

“We shifted from a pure Mumblebone Merinos flock to a prime lamb enterprise crossed with a Border Leicester ram. We then selected the SAMM as we wanted a dual-purpose sheep that was good in carcase size and our climate.

“Wool quality was also important to us and our SAMM sheep have 21-22 micron wool.”

When the Barkla’s bought Mount Molar in April 2012, their Cunnamulla property was carrying 8000 sheep, including 3,800 breeding ewes, across 15,000 hectares.

“We purchased Mount Molar, because we wanted a finishing block to complement our western Queensland prime lamb breeding property,” Mrs Barkla said.

“Clifton was a totally different region and climate, but sadly we walked into one of the biggest droughts we’ve ever seen in both regions 2013. We’ve been hammered with drought, just like everybody else in the rangelands.

“Our sheep numbers at Rosscoe had never ever been as low as they were by December 2014. We were down to a core base of 600 breeding ewes, but we were confident we would be able to rebuild our flock from the quality maternal lines we had retained.”

Thanks to a change of seasons, the Barklas’ two properties are both looking refreshed after good general soaking rain.

“We’ve had beneficial winter and spring rain at Mount Molar and the Darling Downs is a picture of health,” Mrs Barkla said.

“Rosscoe has received very good late winter and early spring rain with a response of beautiful saline and mixed herbages covering the country and with a moisture profile ready to bring on Mitchell, Flinders and blue grasses on the plains.”

But despite the change in seasonal conditions, Mrs Barkla said both properties continued to have issues with high numbers of feral animals, which put pressure on production and required constant management.

She said grazing competition from kangaroo was the biggest threat to the productivity of the rangelands and continued to impact producers’ economically.

“Feral pigs, wild dogs and foxes are also a constant threat to sheep breeding enterprises throughout Australia and remain a major hurdle for both the sheep meat and wool industries.”

In response, she is encouraging all landholders to get involved in effective 1080 baiting programs.

“If every landholder was proactive in the control of feral animals, I believe we could contain them in a relatively short period, but it is a matter of bringing all landholders on board in terms of taking action.

“Feral pigs in particular are a significant biosecurity risk to agricultural industry.”

Despite the challenges of agriculture Mrs Barkla wants to encourage younger generations to return to rural Australia.

“It’s a very exciting time to be involved in agriculture and developments and innovative in technology are changing the way we operate and bringing efficiencies and productivity gains that makes our future look very bright. So, I am pleased to see younger people returning to the bush and I think their prospects are very positive.”

She also believes it will be the younger generation of sheep and wool producers, who recognise and benefit from new technology, like electronic Identification tags.

“Electronic ID has just been legislated for Victorian sheep producers and it is potentially a practice-changer at a paddock level. Like a lot of new technology it has huge implications for improving breeding flocks and helping with management and record keeping on-property.”

Looking ahead, she said sheep numbers were on the rise as seasonal conditions improved, but rebuilding the state flock would be a slow process.

So now, like many of their industry peers, the Barklas are regrouping after the severity of the drought and today remain determinedly focused on the future.

“We believe in the sheep and wool sector so we will start again and rebuild. We’re in the process of doing so now, because we have faith in the long-term viability and sustainability of our industry.”

**Media:** Andrea Corby phone: 33304551