

## The World Federation of Merino Breeders and the ultimate renewable resource

By Heather Dugmore

The spirit of all the outstanding people who have contributed to the growth of the Merino industry worldwide over the past 28 years will be strongly felt at the Cape Wools 9th World Merino Conference in Stellenbosch at the end of April 2014.

*"In a world of diminishing resources, the Merino sheep is the ultimate renewable resource, for feeding and clothing the people of this planet."* These are the words of the late first President of the World Federation of Merino Breeders (WFMB) Australia's inimitable Don Vanrenen who's last World Merino Conference was the 1990 conference in South Africa.

The 2014 World Merino Conference, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time being held in South Africa, is being hosted by the South African Merino breed societies - Merino SA, Dohne Merinos, SA Mutton Merinos and Afrinos – in the beautiful, historic university town of Stellenbosch. Situated 50 kms from Cape Town, Stellenbosch has a long and impressive tradition of research and training in wool sheep breeding. It is also the centre of the South African wine industry. Well-bred Merinos and good wine – you'd be hard pressed to find a more compatible combination.

"Many will remember the very successful 3<sup>rd</sup> World Merino Conference of 1990 that was held in Pretoria, South Africa. I'm confident the conference in Stellenbosch will be equally well organised and exciting. There is certainly strong interest from Australian breeders," says Robert Ashby, WFMB President since 2010, and a delegate for the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders at the World Merino Conferences since 1982. Ashby is a third generation Merino stud breeder from Old Ashrose Stud in Hallett, South Australia. In 2012 he received Australia's prestigious Member of the Order of Australia award for his services to the Merino industry.

The conference will offer in-depth exposure to the Merino industry in South Africa, which is highly progressive in its approach to genetics, reproduction, nutrition and sheep health, as well as the latest international Merino research, trends and news.

### Objectives of the World Federation of Merino Breeders (WFMB)

*According to its Constitution, adopted at the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Merino Conference in Spain in April 1986, the WFMB aims, amongst other things, to:*

- *promote the breeding of Merino sheep and the use of Merino products throughout the world;*
- *promote the merits and benefits of Merino sheep;*
- *disseminate information about Merino sheep; and*
- *hold conferences at regular intervals.*

"We'll be bringing together Merino industry leaders from around the world and offering great networking opportunities and the best of South African hospitality," says the co-organiser of the 2014 World Conference, Francois van der Merwe, a Merino farmer from Calvinia in the Northern Cape.

Leading South African and international speakers will cover a range of subjects of direct interest to Merino breeders, scientists and the Merino trade, and offer a global perspective on the conference theme: *Merino breeding – sustainable enterprise; a cherished lifestyle.*

"Back in 1990 Don Vanrenen spoke of the Merino sheep as the ultimate renewable resource in a world of diminishing resources. He showed remarkable foresight at a time when very few people were talking about sustainability and renewable resources," says Van der Merwe. "In 2014 these are now major global concerns, on



Speakers at the 3rd World Conference in SA in 1990 WFMB president Don Vanrenen, Minister of Agriculture Kraai van Niekerk and Conference Chairman, Paul Jordaan



Current WFMB president Robert Ashby from Old Ashrose stud, South Australia



Members of the very efficient organizing committee Merino 2014 are Alida Hoffman, Francois van der Merwe and Francois Heunis.



President of Merino SA, Julian Southey and his wife, Trish on their farm Manor Holme near Middelburg

### *What do you think the WFMB contributes to Merino breeders worldwide?*

#### **Merino SA President Julian Southey responds:**

The theme chosen for the Merino 2014 World Conference - *Merino breeding: sustainable enterprise; a cherished lifestyle* - says so much. The challenge, especially for our generations of family Merino businesses, is to design a strategy for a sustainable preferred future that will reward the passion we have for this wonderful breed and add value to all involved in our industry - from our farm staff to our trading partners.

For me, key to the whole exercise of the WFMB is the *building of relationships* with all the role players in our industry - from the primary producers to the final consumers. The WFMB provides a forum where role players in the global Merino industry can exchange ideas with open minds and 'teachable' spirits.

For our industry to thrive, it obviously has to be economically attractive and profitable at grassroots level, but market forces are ruthless and we need to be alert to change and to welcome innovation in our industry. WFMB is the platform where innovative ideas can be aired and hopefully implemented for the long-term sustainability of our industry.

Commercial breeders need direction and information to equip them to adapt their own strategic plans towards future sustainability and where the profits in the industry will be in the ensuing years. Energy is surely going to be one of the critical limiting resources, including in agriculture, in the near future. I believe Merino breeding is one of the most energy efficient and biologically sustainable enterprises - whether on arid Karoo veld or irrigated pastures. It can also be highly profitable where fertility and reproduction are emphasized, offering wonderful future growth opportunities worldwide for this special breed of ours.

which the survival of our planet depends, and hence we chose to focus on sustainability at this conference."

The conference theme emphasises both the economic importance of Merino farming as a significant and sustainable commercial enterprise and the love and dedication with which Merino breeders regard their vocation, looking after flock and veld, often over several generations.

The World Conference, aptly named *Merino 2014* will also mark the 225th anniversary of the arrival from Europe of the first Merinos in South Africa (then the Cape of Good Hope) in 1789. It's a dramatic story that follows the dispersal of the Merino flocks from Imperial Spain through France, England, Saxony and other parts of Europe and associated colonies during the 1700s and 1800s.

"We who breed Merino sheep today owe a great deal to the jealously guarded Merinos of Imperial Spain," said Vanrenen who had a deep understanding of the remarkable partnership between human beings and their sheep; and of the origins and migrations of the Merino, which played a key role in geographic conquest and economic development.

As Michael L Ryder observed in his book *Sheep and Man*, "It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the history of man is the history of sheep." A history that leads us across the millennia to the formation of an organisation that has made sure the magnificent Merino retains its prominence in the current and future history of the world: the WFMB.

Vanrenen is the undisputed father of the WFMB, having arranged the first meeting of interested Merino-breeding countries at the first ever World Merino Conference in Melbourne in 1982, hosted by the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders and attended by 12 countries. The WFMB was formally established at the second World Merino Conference in Madrid in 1986 where Vanrenen was elected as the first World President. In Madrid it was also agreed that the Secretariat should be based in Australia. Vanrenen was re-elected at the third World Conference in South Africa but sadly did not live to make the fourth in Montevideo after succumbing to pancreatic cancer in 1992 - a few months after he was awarded the Officer of the Order of Australia (AO). He handed over his exceptional legacy to Stuart Beveridge, President of the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders (1991 - 1994) and Principal of Wyuna Merino Stud in Gilgandra, New South Wales, Australia.

"I do not think any of us could estimate the amount of work, thought and sheer energy Don put into making the Federation the success we have come to take for granted," says Beveridge who served as Federation President from 1992 - 2002. "Don Vanrenen *lived* world Merinos."

Federation leaders, assisted by men and women of remarkable commitment from around the world, have since developed the WFMB from its inaugural meeting in 1986 into the global federation it is today. The 11 current members are Argentina, Australia, France, Hungary, Lesotho, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, Spain, USA and Xinjiang PRC.

An important aspect of the work of the WFMB is that it facilitates the World Merino Conference that brings together Merino people from all over the world to form or renew friendships and share



Merino wool is a fantastic and diverse natural fibre which will be discussed at the 2014 WMC

innovations and learn from each other's environments and social, political and economic conditions. Conferences are held every four years and since the inaugural conference in Australia in 1982, they have been held in Spain in 1986; South Africa in 1990, Uruguay in 1994, New Zealand in 1998, Hungary in 2002, Perth, Australia in 2006 and France in 2010.

As all industry members know, there have been high times and low times. The man who steered the WFMB through one of its lowest times is Stuart Beveridge. "The 1990s for the wool industry, and for the Merino industry worldwide, could perhaps be labeled the hardest, most desperate decade of the Merino breeder," says

Beveridge. "The USSR was disintegrating after the collapse of communism and with most of the northern hemisphere in a state of recession our markets vanished overnight. Merino wool growing confidence was at rock bottom. Many believed that wool would never become profitable again."

But it did, and, as all Merino producers know today, wool is once again on the rise and the world has reawakened to this extremely special natural fibre.

"I have mentioned it many times, Merino wool is a fantastic and diverse product. It is wanted by the world and we will keep producing this amazing product so that the world will continue wanting it," emphasises Beveridge who was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his contribution to the Merino industry and Australian agricultural economy. "We must always remain positive - we have been positive in extremely tough times - and we will keep on being positive and working at achieving the prices we need and to attract new Merino breeders. We are looking most forward to discussing all this and more in South Africa."

The 2014 World Merino Conference promises a highly informative and entertaining three days. If you are a Merino farmer, stud breeder, researcher, scientist or in any other way associated with the Merino industry, whether through trade or as a service provider, this is an event not to be missed.

As Van der Merwe puts it: "You will be informed and you will be entertained. You will have your mind fed and you will have your senses filled. The Cape and Stellenbosch offers so much, and you will definitely not leave without sampling the gastronomic and oenological delights of this region. We look forward to welcoming you.

