



Sustainable livestock vow not just hot air

SUE NEALES
RURAL REPORTER

AUSTRALIA'S 55,000 cattle and sheep producers have pledged to consumers to all be farming sustainably by 2020.

In a move designed to bridge the gap about what happens behind the nation's farm gates, the industry has gone on the offensive to convince urban Australians that red meat production is environmentally, socially and ethically sustainable.

The new Target 100 initiative will be launched in Sydney today by the National Farmers Federation, the Cattle Council of Australia, the Sheepmeat Council of Australia, red meat processors and Meat and Livestock Australia.

The project has won the backing of Australia's best-known environmentalist, Tim Flannery, conservation group WWF and eminent chef and restaurateur Justin North.

It details 100 research projects under way to help beef, lamb and mutton producers make more sustainable use of their water, land and soil, as well as other initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, recycle waste and use energy more efficiently.

Other ideas and projects aim to find alternatives to animal husbandry practices likely to be targeted in coming years by animal rights activists, such as the castration of calves.

Victorian cattle and sheep farmer Bill Bray is seen as a leader in the field of environmentally sustainable red meat production.

With his Walkerville property Yaringa having been redesigned around shelter belts, native vegetation corridors, new wetlands and fenced-off watercourses, Mr Bray markets his free-range, hormone-free Angus-Charolais and Murray Grey beef under the dual brands of Gippsland Natural and environmentally certified "Enviomeat."

"This program is vital; it's not about saying that producers have never been farming sustainably in the past but about making the public aware of what farmers are doing and continuing to improve our practices," he said.

"Everything we do on our farms . . . is about interacting with the environment, and we know unless we look after our soil, water, pastures, trees and animals, we are not going to be farming well or producing quality meat."

The Target 100 program aims to counter growing perceptions among consumers that livestock farming is cruel and hurts the environment.

The bulk of Australia's emissions, even more than its industrial carbon pollution, can be attributed to methane gas expelled in farts and burps by the nation's 27

million cows and 69 million sheep.

Research projects included in the Target 100 initiative, some by CSIRO scientists, plan to more effectively measure the methane emitted from livestock, and investigate whether individual cattle or sheep can be selectively bred or reared to fart and burp less.

A study by the Primary Industries Education Foundation revealed that 40 per cent of Australian schoolchildren think farmers damage the environment, while less than half the students linked agriculture with innovation or scientific research.

Andrew Ogilvie, president of the Cattle Council of Australia, believes it is up to the industry to better explain how they are changing and improving their systems in light of new research and community expectations.

"By saying we are committed to farming sustainably by 2020 doesn't mean that a lot of our farmers haven't been doing it already," said Mr Ogilvie, a sheep and cattle producer from South Australia. "But consumers rightly have expectations about how their food supply is produced, and it is up to livestock producers to demonstrate we are sustainable and moving even more in that direction backed by sound research projects."



AARON FRANCIS

Victorian cattle and sheep farmer, Bill Bray, a leader in the field of environmentally sustainable red meat production, on his Walkerville property yesterday