**Trust in AWI is broken**

KARBULLAH Poll Merino principal Mark Murphy at Goondiwindi in Queensland said his trust in AWI had been broken by the focus group experience.

“Where do they come from ... we’re battling a drought here at the moment and my mind is elsewhere and you tend to move on and you tend to trust people,” he said.

“But the trust was well and truly broken in this instance.

“I’m just sorry, it doesn’t tick any boxes, any way you look at it, for love nor money.”

Mr Murphy said since the June 15 meeting, he has had an email from AWI’s new general manager of research Dr Jane Littlejohn, and cced to Neil Judd and AWI CEO Stuart McCullough, to confirm that “all information gathered from discussions during the focus groups is being treated by AWI as confidential and each individual's participation in the focus group is being kept anonymous."

But he said: “Who do you trust, I don’t know?”

“They are trying to cover their tracks a bit and I know Jane wasn’t even part of the organisation at the time.”

Mr Murphy believes at least one breeder tempered their comments during the focus group meeting because it was being observed.

“He didn’t say anything untoward, but he was careful about what he said, and I didn’t understand that at the time.

“We held nothing back, we climbed into it, and the group after us, which were our clients, also held nothing back at all,” he said.

“While ever these opportunities come up, I won’t hesitate, because I think we’ve got to get it right.”

“It’s a huge disappointment that it happened, but if I was asked to do it again tomorrow, I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again,” Mr Murphy said.

He would like to see a report from the focus group meetings.

**Focus group process disconcerting and inappropriate**

HAZELDEAN Merino Stud principal Jim Litchfield at Cooma in New South Wales said the focus group process with observers behind a one-way mirror was disconcerting and inappropriate.

“I appreciated being asked for my views; however, I would have preferred a direct approach rather than through this method.”

Mr Litchfield also noted the lack of information before the meeting.

“That is, no papers and very little detail and certainly there was no mention beforehand of the (one-way) mirror being used.

“It was clear there was two groups being interviewed separately; performance-based breeders and the more traditional breeders, but we were not made aware of this,” he said.

“We seemed to be kept in the dark, which I found rather strange.

“At the conclusion of the meeting, the group also requested the opportunity to email the facilitator to follow up after the meeting and make a further contribution, now that we were aware of what the meeting was about,” Mr Litchfield said.

“The facilitator said he would email us all so that we could respond via reply, but I did not receive any further communication on the matter.”

**Worst scenario is ‘no report’**

CENTREPLUS Merino stud principal Mark Mortimer said he wasn’t aware whether AWI chairman Wal Merriman was observing the focus group discussion behind a one-way mirror or not, but he wasn’t too concerned.

“You were aware of it (being observed), so you moderated everything you said,” Mr Mortimer said.

“For the guys who didn’t know from the start that would be a different story.”

“If you had asked me upfront, who is behind the mirror, I would have given you a list of the staff members I know who works in this space for AWI, I wouldn’t have given you board members’ names,” he said.

“I wouldn’t have changed how I behaved whether he was there or not, given that we were told the client was there.

“Everything you said you know would have been documented and taken to the board through the staff,” Mr Mortimer said.

“It was a bizarre experience but I am not going to call it a bad experience.”

His ideal outcome from the focus group and the other meetings would be the results are made public.

“My worst case scenario is I never hear anything about it.”

He said media interest in the focus group now meant that the results which could have been beneficial will always be questioned. Mr Mortimer had hoped that despite “the divide” between performance-recorded and traditional breeders, the focus groups would result in some common goals “that everyone has, that brings us together.”

“In hindsight, does any of this surprise me, sadly no.

“Am I surprised that AWI has ended up in this situation? No.”

“Certainly Wal is in the second (traditional breeder) category – Wal makes no bones about that, whereas I see us both as sheep breeders and we use tools to achieve our outcomes.”

**‘Worst’ workshop I’ve attended**

TOLAND Merino Stud principal Phil Toland at Violet Town, Victoria, said he didn’t know whether Mr Merriman’s presence would have changed the outcome, but “perhaps” his attendance had compromised the research and the AWI staff involved.

Mr Toland said he didn’t think anything could be done about the incident.

“It’s just another example of the sort of goings on that happens at AWI board level.”

“It’s nothing unusual, that’s the way they’ve been doing business anyway,” he said.

Mr Toland said knowing the results of the focus groups is probably more important, rather than whether it was done “rightly or wrongly.” He would like to see a report on the outcome of the research.

“The presenters who were paid to do the survey said we would probably get a report.

“That’s what I am concerned about; what did that independent company report back to AWI?” he said.

 “I would be really interested in the report on what was found out between the non-users, the users and the clients, the commercial blokes who use them.

“If I had known that the results were going to be kept confidential I wouldn’t have bothered to go.”

Mr Toland said he had been to a lot of similar workshops.

“It would be the worst one I’ve been to.

“We were there for 2.5 hours and the first two hours we just rambled around – you couldn’t work out why we were there.”

**Breeders tempered their comments**

WOODYARRUP Merino and Poll Merino Stud principal at Broomehill in Western Australia, Craig Dewar, said when he walked into the City Group Rooms building behind Mark Mortimer, the NSW breeder turned and said he had seen “someone who looked very much like Wal.”

Then when the pair got upstairs, Mr Dewar said Andrew Michael told him he thought Wal Merriman was in the building.

Mr Dewar said he suspected from the start the group would be videoed for the whole workshop. He was less concerned about Mr Merriman hearing his opinions on issues, due to his WA location, but was concerned the breeders had been invited for an in-confidence meeting and encouraged to have an open, frank discussion.

“There were breeders there, closer to Wal, who said things that are really confidential to them, but if we are invited to something like that and we are not honest and frank, it’s pointless; the outcome is not achieved.”

He believed at least two breeders tempered their comments believing Mr Merriman could have been watching and listening.

Mr Dewar said he would be stating his position on Mr Merriman’s actions in his reply to an email from Mr Judd and Jane Littlejohn, and cc’ing AWI CEO Stuart McCullough.

**Concern about disunity between AWI and MLA**

APART from the transparency and governance issues raised by the June 15 MERINOSELECT focus group session, Leahcim Merino Stud principal Andrew Michael was also worried about lack of unity or disconnect between AWI and MLA.

This included Mr Merriman moving against MLA managing director Richard Norton when the MLA leader said the sheep meat industry was “very exposed” on the issue of mulesing.

Mr Michael said he spoke with a major meat processor eight years ago, who said the company could not fill a contract to supply processed lambs because he could not guarantee the mothers of those lambs were not mulesed.

“This is a very positive time within the sheep industry, but we must learn to listen to what our clients are requiring and supply the best product possible.

“We need for people to understand that our levy monies are going into these boards, but it needs to be spent properly and we need the right people in there, and they do not necessarily have to be producers.”

Although the Leahcim operation has not mulesed since 2004, Mr Michael said AWI and MLA’s public differences had clouded some of the industry’s positive aspects of the genetics alternative to ceasing mulesing and the fact that animal welfare is extremely important to farmers working with livestock.