



Garry Hannigan with Isaac Crilly, chairman of Northern Ireland Sheep Breeders Association. Sheep pictured are Beltex and Llynn.

Rangelands potential:

## Meat-ing a market for organic lamb

By HOLLY VYNER

Grazier Garry Hannigan, from 130 kilometres east of Broken Hill in the harsh rangelands of NSW, has been the recipient of two major awards now. These came about through his pursuit of new production methods to provide major benefits to the lamb and wool industries in his region, both conventional and organic.

*Australian Organic Journal* profiled Mr Hannigan when he received the inaugural NSW Farmer of the Year award in 2004 for his innovative and environmentally sound grazing operation. It was great exposure for the organic industry to have an organic producer receiving this award.

Since then, Mr Hannigan has received the 2005 Nuffield Australia Farming Scholarship for a livestock producer supported by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). The grazier scholar has just returned from a Nuffield trip to Europe, Asia and America and will release details of his studies in the coming months.

What has a grazier in his 40s on some of the most sparsely vegetated land discovered to receive such highly regarded recognition for his work?

Through the scholarship, Mr Hannigan is interested in gain-

ing an understanding of the wide market for organic lamb in countries where there is high disposable wealth. This, he argues, will enable the expansion of drought-tolerant sheep production in rangelands by developing markets in Europe, Asia and America.

Not only would this achieve greater profitability for the region, it would allow better environmental sustainability through lamb meat breeds developed especially for that region and managed to organic standards.

"I believe that organic lamb production could work as an alternative to the conventional wool industry out here using African breeds over Merinos," Mr Hannigan says.

"In this area between Broken Hill and Wilcannia, grasses are 100% native vegetation, mainly salt bush and blue bush, and it is this sort of vegetation and harsh environment which African sheep breeds such as Dorper and Damara thrive on.

"The lambing percentage of Merino is about 75%-80%, in comparison with the African breeds we have which yield a high 120%-160%."

Mr Hannigan has been working on improving genetics, crossing Dorper with Damara. Both breeds are hair sheep and thus not suited to wool. The Dorper has prime lamb traits, becoming very popular for its meat. The Damara is a fat-tail breed, meaning it stores its fat reserves in its tail like a camel. It is extremely hardy.

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“Crossing these two breeds is best for obtaining hardiness and delivering prime export-quality lamb meat all year,” Mr Hannigan says. “The average carcase weight when sold is 18-24kg, and with an average fat score of 3.”

Apart from his success with breeds, Mr Hannigan has effectively maintained a high-profitability production without compromising the environment during a time of consistently lower-than-average rainfall over the past seven years.

“I stock conservatively, around one sheep to 15 acres (six hectares) and look after the country,” he says. “That is the secret to getting through hard times; apart from that, continuing to improve genetics of the breeds I stock for achieving higher sustainability and profitability.”

So by travelling around the world, what has Mr Hannigan learned that may benefit his cause for the region?

The biggest discovery, he says, is “this region is one of few locations in the world which can easily achieve organic status without taking a production loss and not just be organic, but to high standards such as that of ACO (Australian Certified Organic) that have not been subject to watering down, as in some countries”.

“I have been able to see the quality of the product that we’re competing with, and export-wise there is a lot of interest and good opportunity in the United States, United Kingdom, Asia and Europe for Australian organic lamb, especially the UK,” Mr Hannigan says.

“New Zealand currently has the largest quota for the European markets.

“Japan is still a few years behind the trends of the rest of the world in organics. However, education of consumers is picking up quickly. The Japanese in general like to do everything to a high standard and it is my belief that the quality of organic over conventional will be highly sought after in coming years.

“If the organic industry in the rangelands takes the right approach, it has the potential to revitalise and revolutionise the region supplying to these export markets.”

What about the domestic lamb market? Mr Hannigan says the region already currently supplies a third of the demand for organic lamb in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. There are 10

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**Organic Lamb chops on the shelf at Harrods, London.**

or 12 local producers that supply the Sydney processors currently.

“Eventually I hope to begin a regional label,” Mr Hannigan says. “Currently meat from this region isn’t marketed in any way differently from other organic meat sold to wholesalers but there is potential for marketing high-quality lamb with the distinct flavour of this country.

“The salt bush in this region provides a flavour to the meat which has great potential for marketing in combination with its organic status.”

Mr Hannigan says that apart from lamb, there is plenty of opportunity for organic wool and goats for his region also.

“Most of the conventional producers in the Murray Darling region are wool producers and may not be willing to convert to lamb production. There are more and more opportunities in organic wool also,” he says.

“Worldwide, there is a growing popular trend for organic clothing and textiles. The African breeds wouldn’t be suitable. You would keep to Merinos for that.

“I feel the organic goat meat industry could well be one of the next growth industries for the rangelands area of Australia and graziers in this region could be well positioned to supply this market.”

What is the next step for educating the region?

Already, Mr Hannigan is in demand to present his findings and educate growers through workshops organised by Nuffield Australia, MLA and Bestprac (AWI). He is making five presentations across South Australia and Western NSW in the next few months.

“I will be writing a full report and making a presentation on this for Nuffield in March,” he says. “This will then become available for general downloading and reading from the Internet.”

Mr Hannigan does not stop looking at different ways to improve what he does. With his partner Tracy he has been looking at another side-line incomes.

“We are interested in pursuing a market for organic yabbies,” he says. “There is possibly a niche market in Adelaide, where chefs are looking for new and interesting things on their menus. It would make a good contrast to the lamb production.”



**Dorpers and Damaras at Churinga Rangelands, Broken Hill, NSW.**