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## NEW SHEEP - A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

### Introduction

New sheep—new imported breeds, new improved strains and new ideas are stimulating developments in many parts of the industry. This session highlights the possibilities and also the stimulation that the "new sheep" are bringing to the sheep industry. These new sheep are alerting us to new market possibilities and better ways of meeting the requirements of our markets. The linkage with the market is a key focus in these papers – how is the more direct interaction with the market helping us to focus making real progress with our

sheep industry? On the farm are breeds still relevant or should we simply be using different breeds as sources of the genes we need to meet our markets and improve our profitability. The challenge is to use our different breeds in the most creative ways. This session is about new breeds in the broadest sense – new breeds, new strains and new ideas. They offer promise and a challenge.

*P. Fennessy*

### Sheep farming - beyond survival

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#### ABSTRACT

Since the completion of the latest GATT negotiations a lot of reflection has been devoted to new opportunities that will be offered to New Zealand's primary industries, but there is a more subtle issue that is less frequently mentioned. The effects of competition will be felt by every sector of every industry. In a country committed to freer trade and in a world increasingly moving in the same direction, no industry will be able to lay claim to more land, water, research resources or investment than it can justify by way of return. For the sheep industry, this means looking beyond mere survival, towards shaping the future by making the best possible use of resources devoted to it. Sheep farming must become more than just a default land use.

**Keywords:** Sheep; profitability; GATT; crossbreeding.

#### INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the perception of many, the sheep industry will not disappear. New Zealand will remain committed by history, a wide skill base and 24 billion invested dollars. When Israel was threatened from all around by neighbouring states, Premier Golda Meir said "We have a secret weapon, we have nowhere else to go." There is a measure, albeit a diminishing one, to which her statement applies to this country and its sheep industry. The issue is not its continued existence, but what form and size the future sheep industry will take. I share some of my thoughts on this matter, hoping that it will both stimulate you to also ponder these issues and will establish a background for the papers that follow.

#### BACKGROUND

I started farming in the early 1960's, when the accepted aim was to have a national flock of 111 million ewe equiva-

lents by 1972. Those who were members of farmers groups in the sixties will well remember the exhortations to produce more. Robert Muldoon was so supportive of this approach that he was prepared to exercise parliamentary privilege on the matter. He put other people's money where his mouth was. There was nothing inherently wrong with the ensuing increase in production. The scuttlebutt was that subsidised producers get no true signals about what they should produce. Commentators are forever pointing out that the national lamb kill has dropped from a peak of 39 million in the halcyon years to around 24 million today. What they omit to say is that 39 million was an artificially high figure. The current levels of lamb production are the result of the initial destocking stage necessary for a return to market-driven levels. Not only has the decline been quite appropriate, it was necessary and it does not herald the demise of the industry.