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An invitation is extended to all those involved in the field of animal production to apply for membership of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production at our website www.nzsap.org.nz

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Presidential Address 2009

Role of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production in fostering collaboration

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When you sign up for a year as President of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production, you should make an attempt to understand who the Society really is, and how the members are best served by the Society. If you go back through previous Presidential Addresses some recurring themes come up around this issue of who is the Society Membership and what should the Society be doing to best serve the membership? The fact that we frequently re-visit this question shows that it is pertinent. It also proves the words of Abraham Lincoln true when he said *“Books serve to show a man that those original thoughts of his aren't very new at all”*

I would describe the core membership and audience of this Society as “Animal production scientists”. I do this using the word “scientist” in the broadest sense of the term with the intention of being inclusive rather than exclusive. By “scientist” I do not mean only “PhD-qualified research scientists”, or simply those whose profession is to research and generate new knowledge, and then publish their findings. I include in this term anyone who uses scientific knowledge and processes in order to improve animal production. This definition would include agricultural professions such as consultants, veterinarians, research technicians and technical sales people, along with research scientists, lecturers and post-graduate students. There are no doubt other professions which could be added to this list.

Indeed, good farmers quite explicitly use scientific processes of observation and comparison in their management, and develop new knowledge in this way. Such farmers are also scientists in the broader sense of the word. They may not run replicated trials to categorically prove their observations pass the rigour of international peer review as this is not their job and focus, but they intuitively use scientific process and logical thinking to develop and improve many aspects of animal production. They may not think of themselves as “scientists”, but they use science processes as well as the outcomes of science to improve their businesses.

As Chris Burke pointed out in his President's Address in 2007, the New Zealand Society of Animal Production cannot be, and should not try to be, all things to all people. His view, which I share, was that the Society's main service to animal



production industries is to provide a useful function to people that serve the industry, rather than directly to the industry itself. Having said that, the connection between Society's members and industry, and between industry and the Society's members is critical to the effective functioning of our Society. Thus input from our farmer members is essential to the Society.

So, how can this Society play a role in serving its members and continuing to foster the development of good animal production scientists?

Undoubtedly the animal production scientist of today faces a more complex and challenging task compared to that faced by our predecessors when this Society was first formed in 1941. In those times, productivity was the main focus of the animal production scientist, and enormous progress was made and continues to be made in this area of endeavour. However, in the intervening years the task has become much broader. One does not need to be a visionary to see that animal production in the future will be as much about the *impact of production* as it will be about *productivity*. Production efficiency will be important to our industries, but it will not just be measured in terms of dollars, kilograms of dry matter, or mega-joules of metabolisable energy. Efficiency will be about production per unit of emission measured in terms of nitrogen, methane, carbon or faecal water contaminants. All have consequences for livestock production. Breeding objectives, for example, may be couched in terms of maximising production while minimising emissions. Animal nutrition will be about efficiency of utilising nutrients so that methane and nitrogen emissions are reduced. Animal welfare and behaviour will be about minimising the ethical footprint of animal production. The session on climate change in this conference is a demonstration of how the issues surrounding animal production have changed.

In the mean time, technology advances have meant that the tools we are now using to understand and advance animal production are increasingly sophisticated, and require greater expertise to utilise them. In 1941 DNA had not yet been shown to be responsible for carrying genetic information, that came in 1943, or its structure identified. Watson and Crick's work was published in 1953. Our predecessors would not have dreamed that in 2009

we would be sequencing genes and using SNP-chips to identify thousands of genetic differences. Neither would they have imagined that we would be looking at methylation patterns and gene expression arrays to understand influences of both genetics and the environment on animal performance. These tools open up immense possibilities. Notwithstanding, we should also bear in mind that good science is about the hypothesis formulated and the approach used in testing it, rather than the sophistication and complexity of the tools we use to investigate the problem.

A consequence of these technology advances is that animal production science has become an increasingly specialist field. No one individual can possibly cover the range of skills required, even within a discipline and at the same time the increasing complexity of the issues addressed often requires a multi-disciplinary approach, bringing together what were quite separate science fields. From an industry outcome viewpoint, an issues-based approach to problems makes much more sense than disciplines working in isolation. Collaboration is increasingly a key ingredient of the innovation process to produce useful outcomes. With advancing science it will become even more important. Despite this need for increased collaboration, many of our administrative structures in New Zealand place barriers in the way of collaboration. These structures are sometimes funding related, sometimes related to cross-institutional barriers, and sometimes related to barriers within institutional structures. Perhaps they are even related to the structures of scientific societies such as our own New Zealand Society of Animal Production?

As an example, I believe that the links up and down the chain from basic research to application could be significantly enhanced in New Zealand. How many applied animal production scientists have significant collaborations with scientists working at the more strategic research level? How many of us have significant connections with farm consultants in the work that we do? Certainly there are examples of these types of collaborations, but I would suggest that they are less common than they ought to be.

So what useful function does the Society play to assist in addressing these issues, and how might it do this better? I believe the most useful role a society such the New Zealand Society of Animal Production plays is simply to bring people together to talk about issues of common interest, and through that dialogue to see what is happening in other places, other organisations and other industries. This role has not changed since the Society was first formed; indeed it was the principal reason for the Society being formed. However, given the trends I have just spoken about which require increasing

collaboration and interaction between people with different skill sets, this function is possibly even more important now than it was 69 years ago when the Society was formed.

My personal view is that the most important time during these conferences are the tea breaks and lunch time - not because I long for the culinary delights of University Halls of Residence, but because this is the time where real interaction occurs and networks of like-minded animal production scientists are formed and strengthened. These networks are vital for our profession(s) to deliver the best benefit to our pastoral industries. The opportunity this conference provides to form these networks is important, particularly for our young scientists beginning their careers. Good collaborations require common interests, good will and good personal relationships. Many good collaborations start at conferences such as ours.

I also believe that the Society could perhaps put some effort into facilitating better networks, particularly up and down the continuum of basic science to application. It would benefit us all if we had a wider range of papers presenting basic and detailed molecular science, especially if they were presented with a non-molecular audience in mind. It is pleasing to see a few papers of this nature in this year's conference. It would be great if that increased in future years. Similarly, it would also benefit us to have a number of papers by consultants or technical people outlining the issues they are addressing in real agricultural businesses. Likewise a greater presence of papers related to animal health, or even, dare I say it, the occasional paper on plant and environmental science issues related to animal production would be useful.

Are these ideas realistic for the Society or not? I would be interested in hearing your views during this conference. There is certainly a wide range of activities occurring in New Zealand which could quite legitimately be presented as part of a society interested in animal production, but are very rarely seen at our conferences. We perhaps need to look at why this might be. Have we created barriers, real or perceived, which might discourage cross-fertilisation? If so, what can we do to overcome them?

While it is useful to look briefly at what we might do better, we should not dwell on it excessively. Animal production science is alive and well and I believe gaining increasing recognition in our set of government, Wellington. The glass is three quarters full. The Organising Committee have put together a good conference programme with plenty of opportunities to learn new things, meet new people, renew old acquaintances, form new and useful collaborations, and have some fun in the process.