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New Zealand Society of Animal Production - The First 50 Years

I.E. COOP

The New Zealand Society of Animal Production was constituted officially on 19 August 1941. Its first Conference or Meeting was held on the same date, so this year marks the 50th Annual Meeting rather than the 50th Anniversary. This paper is not a history of the Society, it is a summary of events leading to its formation, a brief description of the early years and a comparison with the present.

THE SCENE IN 1941

One needs to be reminded of the conditions existing in the country at the time. There were only 31 million sheep, 2.5 million dairy cattle, 2.0 million beef cattle and 1.6 million human beings. The livestock industry was more important relatively than it is today, providing virtually the only (95%) export income of the country, with Britain as the market (87%).

The importance of ryegrass and white clover was known, soil - plant - animal relationships were coming to be understood, and top-dressing with superphosphate was being introduced on dairy farms. Hill country pastures had deteriorated to such an extent that the government had set up a Hill Country Commission to report on the crisis in hill farming. In the dairy industry the cattle were predominantly Jersey with Milking Shorthorn next. Skim milk and whey from butter and cheese making were being fed to pigs, for there was no other outlet. The sheep industry was single minded - 85% of both the breeding ewes and the terminal sires were Romney and Southdown, respectively.

Cattle and sheep breeding was in the hands of pedigree breeders whose yard stick was eye appeal and Show Ring performance, though the dairy industry, always the leader, had already introduced milk recording and was moving towards AI sire surveys.

An animal research infrastructure was beginning to emerge. Government agricultural research had already been carved up - soils and pastures to DSIR, animals to Department of Agriculture and this division

created some jealousies which continue to the present day. The Grasslands Division of DSIR was well established and world recognised. Traditionally in underdeveloped countries animal health is given first priority. There was already an animal health laboratory - Wallaceville Animal Research Station and there were veterinarians in the field. Mineral deficiencies of cobalt and iodine, had been recognised and counteracted but the two current big problems of hogget illthrift and facial eczema remained unsolved. Some animal production research did exist at Massey, Lincoln and the Department of Agriculture farm at Ruakura but on a very limited scale.

Economically the country was still feeling the effects of the great depression of the 1930s, this together with involvement in World War II, created shortages of finance and farm labour for maintenance, let alone farm development.

ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY

The origins of the Society of Animal Production can be traced back to the 1930s, to several individuals having an interest in the application of genetics to animal breeding and in part having difficulty reconciling the science of genetics with the deeply entrenched traditional pedigree system. On the outside there already existed a Grasslands Association, DSIR and a Grasslands Division, and a Wheat Research Institute conducting plant breeding programmes.

The prime mover in advancing the cause of genetics in animal breeding was not a scientist but a farmer and pedigree milking shorthorn breeder having a special interest in the genetics of cattle breeding - J.M. Ramstead of Matangi. He had a Diploma of Agriculture of 1902 from Lincoln College, but such was his intellect and interest in science in agriculture that in 1936 he had been invited to become a member of the DSIR Council, a position he held for 18 years. As a result he had wide contacts including the Dairy Board and the Dairy Husbandry staff at Massey. His initial idea was to form a

Genetics Association along the lines of the American one of which he was a member. After discussion with C.M. Hume, Director of the N.Z. Dairy Board's Improvement Plan and A.H. Ward the Technical Officer of the Board, later to become General Manager, Ramstead in April 1941 called a meeting to be held in June. Ramstead was also in touch with other people, including C.P. McMeekan recently returned to NZ from gaining his Ph.D. under Hammmmond in Cambridge and at the time Professor of Animal Husbandry at Lincoln. Ward and McMeekan helped draw up the invitation list.

Already the wider discussions taking place were leading to a consensus that if a Society were to be established it should cover the whole field of animal production rather than the more restricted one of animal genetics and breeding. The June 1941 meeting was attended by: J.M. Ramstead (Chairman); J.F. Filmer (Department of Agriculture, Head of Animal Research Division), I.J. Cunningham (Department of Agriculture, Head of Wallaceville Animal Research Station.), C.M.S. Hopkirk (Department of Agriculture, Animal Research Division), C. Hume (New Zealand Dairy Board Director, Herd Improvement Plan), A.H. Ward (New Zealand Dairy Board, Technical Officer), W.M. Hamilton (DSIR, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture), P.R. McMahan (DSIR, Wool Research Laboratory), O. Frankel (DSIR, Plant Geneticist, Wheat Research Institute), W. Riddet (Massey College, Professor of Dairy Husbandry), F.W. Dry (Massey College, Animal Geneticist), C.P. McMeekan (Lincoln College, Professor of Animal Husbandry), J.W. McLean (Lincoln College, Veterinary Science), K.A. Wodzicki (Victoria University, Professor of Animal Ecology).

Foundation of the Society

The June meeting confirmed that a Society entitled the New Zealand Society of Animal Production be established and it elected a subcommittee to draw up a constitution, rules and regulations. A larger and more widely representative meeting was then called to take place on 19 and 20 August 1941 with the dual purpose of considering and hopefully ratifying the establishment of such a Society, and the attending a conference with presentation of papers.

The meeting was held at the Dairy Board offices in Wellington, and attended by 45 persons. It confirmed

the formation of a N.Z. Society of Animal Production and elected officers - President - Ramstead, Vice President - McMeekan, Hon. Secretary-Treasurer - Ward, Committee: Riddet, Filmer, Dry, Levy (DSIR Grasslands). The first animal conference of the Society then followed.

The objectives of the Society were:-

- a) To set up an organisation which will bring about active collaboration of all workers concerned with animal production.
- b) To provide an annual meeting of workers and breeders at which papers will be read and discussed and various problems submitted.
- c) To take such action as may be considered necessary to make improvements in animal production.

The formation of the Society of Animal Production was not to exclude related Societies such as the Dairy Science Association, Veterinary Association, Grasslands Association which already existed and others yet to be formed but rather to concern itself with, or to embrace all those people and activities involved in, the wide range of animal production. So began the New Zealand Society of Animal Production.

Since some honour attaches to Foundation Membership it is interesting to note that this was given to all those who were invited (about 75) to attend the foundation meeting (August, 1941) provided they paid their subscription (half a guinea) by 30 September. On the other hand formation of the Society was not universally approved. There was some public criticism of two days of talking each year during wartime.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT

The affairs and activities of a Society inevitably are closely related to the research activities of its members. The major research development occurred soon after the Society was established. The Animal Research Division of the Department of Agriculture under Filmer carried out a very significant expansion of production research at Ruakura. Filmer, an Australian, one of the "discoverers" of cobalt had come to New Zealand in

1937. McMeekan who had left Lincoln College in 1943 after a disagreement with the Director, went to Ruakura where he quickly built it into an animal research station of world renown having an emphasis on the conversion of grass into milk, meat and wool, and on field work with grazing animals rather than on research in the laboratory. He was the outstanding figure of the 1940-60 period. In 1962 he left to join the World Bank.

The 1950s saw the Department of Agriculture establish several smaller research stations such as Invermay and Hill Country Research Station, Whatawhata, having substantial animal research programmes.

THE UNIVERSITIES

Massey and Lincoln Colleges, also expanded rapidly after the war and the contribution of their staff began to become significant in the 1950s. All along, however, the N.Z. Dairy Board had a head start over all other institutions in production research, because it had factual information about its industry and was already into breeding based on performance. The contribution of Ward and other Dairy Board staff was especially important in the early years. Hamilton who later became the Secretary (Director General) of DSIR was also a strong supporter of the Society through DSIR's responsibilities in soils and pasture research and his encouragement of animal production which was not his official responsibility.

Perhaps an even greater development was the phenomenal increases in sheep production during the 1950s and 1960s brought about by aerial topdressing and farm development, which was to stimulate research of all kinds but especially upon sheep. This in turn brought forward a new generation of animal scientists who were to shine in that and the later periods of the Society's history.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE SOCIETY- THEN AND NOW

The foundation membership was 75. This figure grew rapidly to 140 by 1945 and 250 by 1950, but thereafter growth was slow for membership did not reach 350 until 1970. A successful membership drive in the early 1970s lifted the figure to 600 at which level, 600-700,

it has remained ever since.

Attendance at annual meetings has increased from 40-60 during the early years to 150-200 in recent years. Proportionately this represents a decline from 60% to below 30% of membership - a not unusual phenomenon as the first flush of enthusiasm wanes and life settles down to a continuing existence.

ANNUAL CONFERENCES

In the early years conferences were invariably held in Wellington and it was not until 1952 that the Society adopted a policy of moving the venue to the research centres of Ruakura (Hamilton), Massey, Lincoln and Invermay (Dunedin) giving opportunity to inspect the work of the stations.

The nature of the conferences and the papers delivered are a reflection of the times. The first 2-3 conferences were devoted to establishing a sort of baseline. A high proportion of papers were reviews relying heavily on overseas data and experiences, or summarising New Zealand knowledge. They were state of industry and state of knowledge papers. They were rather general papers, wide ranging, industry-related and policy-orientated. During the first 10 years the conferences occupied two days, 12-16 papers being presented at an average of 7 per day.

By the late 1940s, however, the post-war expansion of research was beginning to have an impact. Papers describing current experimental work within New Zealand were coming in a reasonable volume, and soon scientific research and scientific papers began to dominate the conferences. As they did so the presentation and discussion time for each paper has had to be reduced, so that in recent years 15-20 papers per day over a 3 day conference has become the norm. An interesting feature of Society meetings has been the change in the relativity of the disciplines and livestock species over the 50 years. In the first few years conferences were dominated by genetics and breeding reflecting the special interests of some of the founders, and by animal health because of the presence of veterinarians in fair numbers. Within species it was dominated by dairy cattle because only the Dairy Board had good factual information and had a milk recording scheme. Even into the 1950s dairy papers outnumbered sheep perhaps by 3 to 1. But from the 1950s nutrition began

to restore a reasonable discipline balance sheep papers overtook dairy cattle papers and now greatly outnumber them by 5-10 to 1. Beef cattle began to intrude in the 1960s deer in the 1970s and goats in the 1980s.

During those first ten or more years discussion, in the opinion of the older generation, was more lively than it is at present. Partly this was because there were some notably outspoken characters, but mostly because of the proportion of general and policy papers upon which all, including farmers, felt qualified to comment. Even the scientific papers had wide general interest. Especially during the 1950s it was a period of great production advance. The experimental work was largely field research with grazing animals, the so-called "feed-em and weigh-em" type, fairly unsophisticated by today's standards, related to the farmer and highly cost effective. Then too it was a period of simple clear messages for the farmers and a ready supply of evangelists such as Levy, Sears, McMeekan and Ward.

Today there is a much greater degree of specialisation, more scientists, more research being done, and more papers to be presented but relatively fewer people able to comment on the detail. Discussion is therefore curtailed. The Society has over the years debated the important issues of including more policy papers, broad synthesising papers, practical papers to encourage back the farmers who once attended, all at the expense of the detailed scientific papers which the rank and file of scientists wish to present. It is complicated by issues of whether short papers, now made necessary, constitute "publication". These are all in addition to matters of membership, finance and the costs of attending conferences.

It should not be inferred that the Society in the 1980s under the present conditions is inferior to that of the 1940s under the then conditions. In fact the Society has introduced several innovations. One of these is speaker and presentation evaluation, which together with improved visual aids, has raised the standard of paper presentation. An award for young speakers has also helped. The Society, anxious to communicate with farmers and extension workers (consultants), has been active in publishing well presented booklets on special livestock topics.

Finally by the very nature of modern communications the Society and its members have become internationalised. Overseas speakers are at times such

as the present invited to present papers while some of our members participate in international meetings. New Zealand has hosted a World Congress on Sheep and Beef Cattle Breeding in 1982, the Fourth Asian-Australasian Animal Science Congress in 1987 in both of which the Society and its members have taken leading roles.

SOCIETY POLICIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

It is not easy to identify in tangible or concrete terms what the Society has achieved in its 50 years of existence.

The Society is not a professional or political body, inward looking at the conditions of employment, remuneration and status of its members. What it has failed to enhance in that area it has gained by its credibility, openness and international acceptance. Institutions wanting to organise international meetings or conferences in aspects of animal production either overseas or in N.Z. now do so through the Society. Within the country organisations studying issues of significance to the livestock industries contact the Society.

However the most important function and achievement has been that the Society has provided a focus for the sciences of animal production. Not only have the annual conferences provided a medium and an opportunity for the exchange of information between scientists and for the release of research results to the public at large, but they have provided the means by which the young scientist, through the presentation of his paper, tests himself or is challenged before his peers. The reaction of his peers and superiors is the stimulus he/she needs to maintain enthusiasm and dedication. A Society or any Society should provide this and the Animal Production Society certainly does. The measures taken by the Society to improve presentation have been excellent and could well be copied elsewhere.

The Society has been wise to maintain a broad approach to animal production providing members with an opportunity have to listen to a wide range of disciplines such as reproduction, breeding, nutrition and grazing management. In New Zealand too, grassland production has always been a key feature of animal production. This has all helped maintain the reputation of New Zealand agricultural or animal scientists of

having a vision of and an approach to animal production under grazing which is second to none.

The Society has not initiated or maintained a direct influence or even had an opinion on research priorities. Should it have done so? Instead its influence has been indirect through the opinions and activities of the individual members themselves. Should the combined wisdom of the Society members have produced an opinion on the relative funding of highly expensive bio-technology and low cost more practical research using the natural advantage which N.Z. enjoys - namely grassland and availability of large numbers of animals? The Society has not entered this field.

In the authors opinion the Society has moved with the times in regard to the nature and number of papers given at conferences. This has unfortunately given the farmer a considerably lower input and take away than previously. To have maintained the earlier balance would have been too difficult, and to redress some of the balance the Society has published a number of booklets and reviews suitable for the wider audience. As one might expect some "combined wisdom" does operate.

Again in the authors opinion the Society has failed to solve the problem of publication. Though Proceedings of Conferences are published and are a record of the papers, they fall between the type and standard for distribution to one group of end users - the farmers, and the internationally and even nationally recognised scientific journals. Further, the Proceedings of the N.Z. Society are notable for their absence from all except a few overseas libraries.

Finally one must have sympathy for a Society trying to balance its budget in the present circumstances, in a country which in the last decade has been going through an agricultural revolution. In terms of the objectives set out in 1941, one can feel satisfied that they have been achieved and that the Society has performed an essential function satisfactorily or even creditably. A question remains - the Society has opted to take a low profile - should it have gone for the high profile and as a group exerted direct influence in research policy, research funding, and animal production policy?