



Mulesing? No thanks

By **FIONA DAVIS**

FARMERS should be working with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals rather than against them, a Benalla sheep farmer said last week.

John Houghton runs 3200 Merino ewes on his 348-hectare property and does not support the Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) legal case against PETA.

"Legal action won't achieve a solution. Understanding and communication will," Mr Houghton said. "I love wool and enjoy being in the industry, but once again the industry is dividing itself and various factions are attacking each other."

He said PETA and farmers both had the best interests of sheep at heart but the discussion had become polarised and unhelpful.

He was not surprised by the anger farmers felt towards PETA. "I understand when people get defensive about the practice they've been employing for years."

But he said the debate needed to move forward. "Mulesing is a tool in the toolbox to fight fly-

strike – if it's not available ... what should we do?"

"I genuinely believe that with an open mind and a willingness to share ideas we don't need to mules."

Mr Houghton has worked with sheep for more than 20 years and reconsidered his support for mulesing two years ago, after he and his wife moved from Longreach, in western Queensland, where flystrike was not an annual problem. When he found himself jetting the sheep each year in Benalla he decided to try to get by without mulesing.

"I could no longer justify to myself what I was putting the lambs through with the mulesing process. Even though I dislike flystrike just as much as mulesing, I stopped it and I said 'righto, I've got to manage flies in other ways'."

The first year he left a few sheep unmulesed. Pleased with the result, he has not mulesed for the past two lamb drops.

He believes that crutching and shearing in early November has helped combat flystrike. "In my

mind a shorn sheep doesn't get fly strike."

Mr Houghton has also changed his ram supplier and is selecting for free-skinned sheep with pencil-like bundles of fleece. He said this fleece structure dried quickly and was unlikely to rot.

Vigilance is also important. "If I'm not mulesing I've got to be able to keep an eye on my sheep." He said this was harder on larger properties, but not impossible.

Two months ago two PETA members visited Mr Houghton to research alternatives to mulesing. They told him that PETA did not expect to stop farmers from running sheep.

"They said that, although an underlying philosophy of the organisation is abolitionist, they are also realists confronting situations that require practical solutions."

They cited campaigns in the United States against McDonald's and Burger King to lift animal handling standards.

"When they saw efforts had been made, the campaigns stopped."



NEW WAYS: John Houghton has no regrets about stopping mulesing on his Benalla property.