

Importance of Sheep Farming

“ We owe a lot to the four-legged wool-clothed animal called the sheep. It is the mainspring of our prosperity. Since white settlement began, wool has been our principal export and, although now it is being challenged by the products of the cow, it still remains first in the list of values of exports.”

Early Runholders of Otago New Zealand

New Zealand

Sheep have played a huge part in the development of New Zealand's economy. This is reflected in the Coat of Arms for New Zealand, the city of Christchurch and the Reserve Bank of New Zealand which all include a hanging fleece to express the importance of sheep to the nation's economy.



From 1856 to 1987 farming was the most important industry. For those 112 years wool was the country's most valuable export and the combined income from wool and sheep meat dominated New Zealand's agricultural earnings.

In the 1980s, government subsidies were removed and sheep farming became less profitable leading to a decrease in sheep numbers; from an all-time high of 70 million sheep in 1982 to just 31 million in 2013. Despite this decline, wool and meat production has not dropped to the same degree. To keep farms profitable, farmers have placed increased emphasis on breeding sheep for improved meat or wool production.

New Zealand remains the world's largest exporter of sheep meat and strong wool. In 2012, \$776 million worth of wool was exported out of New Zealand and \$2640 million dollars of lamb and mutton was exported.

Central Otago

As one of the pioneers of the sheep farming industry, the importance and benefits to the region are without argument.

The Primary Production Sector (which includes agriculture) is the largest contributor to the Central Otago economy. In 2012 it accounted for 31% of the area's employment and 29% of other business units. Over the same period, it was found that tourism, another leading

industry in Central Otago, only accounted for 5% of both employment and business units.

Within the Primary Production sector, Agriculture is the major industry, making up 98% of the sector's employment. It is largely considered to be the backbone of our local economy and an exceptionally strong industry. Overall the sector contributed about \$250 million to the Central Otago District, which was up by 40% in 2012 from the previous year.

Sheep and beef farming remain the dominant form of farming throughout the region. After years of poorer returns, 2011 and 2012 saw sheep farming figures improve dramatically, largely due to increased wool exports. And with limits on mining approaching in the early 2020's it is expected that farming in Central Otago will only rise.



Golden Fleece Shearing Competition, Alexandra

Understandably, the shearing and wool industry is also huge in Central Otago. Shearing provides both ongoing and seasonal work for many people in Alexandra and the surrounding areas. Competitions such as the Golden Shears and the Tri Nations Wool Shearing Competition provide opportunities for shearers to perform on a world stage and test themselves against shearers from different countries. Locally, Alexandra hosts the New Zealand Merino Shears which began in 1961. This competition is the only national merino shearing and wool handling competition in the country and is usually the first shearing, and much anticipated, competition of the season.

Central Otago shearers have been consistently recognised over the years with names like Brian "Snow" Quinn becoming synonymous with shearing world champions. Quinn, who moved to Central Otago after he married, won the Golden Shears in 1965, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1971 and 1972. He also won the New Zealand Merino Title three times. Alexandra is also becoming renowned for its annual Wool On Awards; a unique design event that showcases the creative use of wool in fashion. The last few years have seen increased entries and participants from as far away as India. The show is guaranteed to be a riot of colour, shape and techniques with truly awe inspiring creations.