





Shame on contamination

Standard Wool, the largest wool buying company in the country, has declared war against contamination, which is not only costing the company dearly, but tarnishes the good name of the South African wool-growing industry.

Co-owners of Standard Wool, Paul Lynch and Mark Wright say they are determined to name and shame producers who delivered contaminated wool and will circulate their names to other buyers. They also appeal to other buyers not to buy wool from producers whose names appear on the list.

They are in the process of drawing up a list of all contaminated lots they have bought so far this season, with producer numbers and the names of the producers. It will be ready for distribution by April.

“We have sought legal advice and were assured that we are within our rights to distribute the names of such offenders, since any form of contamination, is damaging our business and our reputation,” Paul Lynch said.

Only once a producer accepts responsibility for the contamination his name will be removed from the list.

“Our clients pass on claims to us for up to R10 000 and we have proof from which bale the contamination comes. We pass this information on to the



Paul Lynch (left) and Mark Wright, co-owners of Standard Wool, with some of the polypropylene bags that were used as bale partitions.

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broker, who passes it on to the producer, who simply denies the fact that it came from their wool. So, we end up having to pay a claim for something that is beyond our control and should not occur in the first place.

“It is vital that producers understand that South Africa is a small player in the market and has to compete with Australia for market share. It takes only one polypropylene bag in a lot to lose a client and to tarnish the image of the entire industry,” Mark Lynch said.

They believe the majority of producers are aware of contamination and take great care

The iron and metal objects include hammers, weights, bale hooks and a variety of tools. These can damage the wool processing machinery, causing losses of millions of rand to the processor. Even the coring machines at the wool brokers can be damaged.



A Chinese client sent this picture of a polypropylene bag found in wool from South Africa.

in the preparation of their clips. Unfortunately, these producers are also tainted by the small negligible percentage.

The most common forms of contamination are polypropylene partitions and iron objects. The occurrence of these objects in wool has increased to such an extent that South African wool is regarded as the worst contaminated with polypropylene bale partitions and metal objects of all the wool exporting countries.

“It’s hard to believe what comes out of the bales sometimes. Jerseys, children’s sandals, old shoes, T-shirts, beer cans and even chicken eggs,” Mark says. The top 10% of one bale even contained mealies. Fortunately, the particular farmer owned up and undertook to be more vigilant in future.

A major problem is the use of polypropylene bags instead of paper for bale partitions. The danger is that when these partitions are not detected in time, they end up in washing lots,

contaminating the entire lot, causing huge financial losses. Polypropylene fibres don't take up colour and will eventually be clearly visible in dark-coloured fabrics.

"One of our major customers now has a special area where contaminants found in South African wool, such as bale hooks and polypropylene bale dividers, are displayed. It's quite embarrassing to be shown this. During every visit to China we receive complaints about contamination," Mark says.

"The irony is that it took us nearly two years to convince the Chinese that South African wool is of good quality. When you do business with the Chinese it takes time to build a relationship of trust. Contamination can seriously damage such a relationship," Paul says.

Contamination has increased to such an extent that one of the largest Chinese exporters of wool tops now employs a person full time to check all South African wool for contaminants. A local processor has followed suit, following the increase in contamination.

Mark and Paul are making an urgent appeal to farmers to spend time in the shearing shed when their wool is shorn to oversee the process and ensure that no foreign objects end up in wool bales.

"It takes months for the wool to grow. To spend two weeks in the shearing shed while the clip is harvested surely isn't asking for too much," Paul says.

Although clips from the communal areas also present contamination problems, these are handled as a separate type and are not blended with wool from commercial farmers, since buyers are fully aware of the risk these wools present.

Main sources of contamination:

- Foreign objects originating in the shearing shed, for example fertiliser bags, baling twine, pieces of metal, clothing, cigarette butts, etc.
- Wool packs containing loose wool-pack fibres that have not been shaken out before the pack was used.
- Sheep branding inks and certain wound dressings containing discolouring compounds.
- Coloured fibre resulting from cross-breeding or non-woollen sheep breeds running with Merino sheep.
- Residues from pesticides used for the treatment of external parasites on sheep.



There are currently nine wool buyers operating in the country. Standard Wool has been the largest buyer for the past four seasons. Last season (2011/2012) the company bought 13,7 million kilograms to the value of R751,7 million, representing almost 33% of the total value of purchases.

Although a large percentage of its purchases is destined for China, the company also ships wool to other parts of the world.

The second-largest buyer was Modiano with 10,3 million kilograms worth R584 million, followed by Lempriere SA with 5,7 million kilograms wool to the value of R296,7 million.

The top three buying companies export mainly grease wool. 