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Challenge to return more value to the farm gate – West Otago grazier heads to global agri master class

Learning how sheep and beef farmers in other parts of the world are tackling the challenge of “delivering more value back to the farmgate” will be high on the agenda for West Otago livestock farmer Nelson Hancox when he attends a gathering of leading international farmers in Australia this week.

Mr Hancox, a sheep and cattle producer from Kowai Downs, near Tapanui in the South Island, is among five leading New Zealand farmers selected to participate in the **Rabobank Global Farmers Master Class**, which commences in Victoria later this week.

The week-long Master Class will see 40 progressive farmers from across the globe gather to share ideas and information on the future of farming and participate in the educational program.

Mr Hancox says the challenge of increasing returns going back to farmers was one of the biggest issues facing the sheep and beef sector in New Zealand, and one he was keen to explore at the Master Class.

“I’m very interested in learning how the sheep and beef sectors in other parts of the world are managing the margins that are being received by processors, marketers and retailers, and how we can try to see gains in the value that is going back to farmers in our sector,” he said.

“It will be inspiring to be networking with the other international participants and finding out what we can learn from how other industries are doing things around the world.”

Mr Hancox said, along with reduced farmer margins, constraint on production was another big challenge facing sheep and beef farmers in New Zealand.

“Because of changing land use in agriculture and the move to dairying, we’ve seen sheep and beef pushed into the higher, colder country where pasture growth is limited and this means it is harder to supply the northern hemisphere for 52 weeks of the year,” he said.

New Zealand is the world’s largest exporter of lamb and farmed venison, and the fifth largest exporter of beef. With only three to four per cent of New Zealand agricultural production going to the domestic market, Mr Hancox said the country’s producers had to be firmly focussed on how best to supply their export markets.



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“New Zealand really needs to develop ways to produce so that we can hopefully align with the northern hemisphere requirements and be a stable and reliable supplier,” he said.

Mr Hancox and his wife Fiona run 20,000 ewes, 5800 hoggets and 200 Angus breeding cows over three properties in West Otago.

Over winter, they have nil pasture growth for more than 100 days on the higher parts of the properties and snow can lie for up to six weeks between 500 and 750 metres altitude.

During this time, stock is fed brassica crops of swedes and kale, supplemented with hay and balage.

With four children, ranging in age from 14 to 21 – and plans to transfer knowledge and ownership of the farm business to the next generation – succession planning is also an issue Mr Hancox is keen to explore at the Master Class.

“The high value of land means it is difficult for the next generation moving into agriculture and it will be interesting to see how they are going about this in other parts of the world,” he said. “The solution is really about bringing more value back to the farmer.”

Four other leading farmers from New Zealand will join Mr Hancox at the Global Farmers Master Class – dairy farmers Michael Horgan (Southland), Jane Nugent-O’Leary (Manawatu), and Mark Townshend (Hauraki Plains), as well as livestock/grazier Dan Jex Blake (Gisborne).

The week-long program will cover key topics in the context of global agriculture, including social enabling, sustainability, succession, supply chain, science, social media and silicon farming (big data).

These farmers will then join with up to 600 participants from government, industry, academia, media and advocacy groups at the inaugural full-day Rabobank F20 (Food) Summit in Sydney on November 13. Titled ‘Global food security: shared responsibility, collective solutions’, the Summit will feature a range of international keynote speakers discussing the themes of increasing food production, improving access to food, encouraging balanced nutrition, and strengthening stability in markets and production chains.

For more information regarding the Rabobank F20 Summit, please visit www.rabobank.com.au/f20.

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