Getting the best from the woolbelt

Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia
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Productivity
There is scope for improvement in the productivity of wool production as evidenced by large differences between similar farms and stations. Gains will be achieved through careful cost cutting, changes in farming systems to lift production and some restructuring within the industry.

Better linkages between wool growers and the processing and marketing sectors are being developed to improve the efficiency of the wool industry relative to other fibres. The Western Australian Wool Strategy Group is developing initiatives for long-term improvement in the viability of the industry.

Diversification
The trend in wool producing regions is to increased cropping, prime lamb, cattle and export hay production. Individuals are developing new animal industries, horticulture, floriculture, aquaculture and rural tourism. Tree plantations for commercial timber products are expanding in higher rainfall districts.

As discussed in other articles in this issue of the Journal of Agriculture, the economic and ecological sustainability of the traditional woolbelt farming system is questionable. Diversification may improve the long term viability of individual wool growers and their associated districts. Apart from prospects for improving farm and station incomes, diversification provides opportunities for better catchment management and greater employment in rural communities.

Diversification is challenging. Alternative enterprises require substantial investment, new skills are needed, and a great deal of market and technical information must be sought.

For example, the change over from cropping oats to a cereal, canola, grain legume system might appear to be straightforward, however, it involves modified machinery, new chemical technology, specific market and crop variety information, careful selection of soil types, and preparation of paddocks. Wool growers are encouraged to make use of the Department of Agriculture, private firms and farm management consultants to gain market and technical information and to assist with plans to change their enterprise mix.