



# Fletchers - meat and farm products from Australia to the world

By JIM WILSON

Family-owned Fletcher International Exports is a well-known Australian farmer, processor and export of lamb, sheep meat and other agricultural products. The group has two plants, one in Dubbo, New South Wales, and the other near Albany, Western Australia. Together, the two plants process more than 90,000 sheep and lambs a week – that's over 4.5 million head of livestock a year.

Roger Fletcher started the group in 1967, focused on droving livestock and trading sheep. In 1973, the company started processing and marketing meat, and that's still the core of the business today. Fletcher International Exports also farms more than 90,000 hectares of land. The group's pastoral holdings include more than 25,000 hectares of cropping, 2,500 hectares of irrigation and more than 62,500 hectares of livestock grazing land.

The group has expanded into agricultural logistics. It has invested in its grain handling and intermodal freight terminal. Set on a 200 acre site adjacent to the Dubbo processing plant, the grain handling facility has more than 63,000 tonnes of silo and 250,000 tonnes of bunker grain storage. It can also store and containerise all grades of wheat and pulses ready for export.

Fletcher International Exports' logistics division moves, in excess of 18,000 twenty foot equivalent unit containers a year by train to Sydney, and by road to Fremantle. Fletchers owns a train that is operated by Southern Shorthaul Railroad. The train runs up to three times a week, and the group can run extra services. The train calls at DP World, Patrick Terminals, and Hutchison in Sydney. The train stables at Fletcher's private 1.35 kilometre double-ended loop siding. There is over 700 metres of hard-stand train loading area, and container exchange on the train is done with two heavy Hyster forklifts, a Hyster reach stacker and a 16 tonne Toyota container handler.

The company's operations span New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia.

Shipping Australia chatted to Fletcher International Exports' managing director and founder, Roger Fletcher, to find out more about its products, overseas markets, transport, logistics and how Australia's agriculture industry copes with natural disasters.

## Q. What products do you sell?

**A.** We are a diversified agri-business and we ship meat, co-products, wool, skins, wheat, cotton, barely, chickpeas and other commodities.

## Q. You're well known for your sheep and lamb products. What are the major markets for sheep meat?

**A.** All continents on Earth have demand for sheep meat. Historically, there has been a place for sheep in all major societies for both food and fibre, and this stands true today.

## Q. Are volumes for sheep meat and products rising, declining, staying flat? What are the trends?

**A.** There has been a downward trend in the global population of sheep in the past 50 years, due to competing fibres and land use. There have been great steps forward in the eating quality and productivity of lamb production, combined with highly sophisticated processing technology and global container shipping. We can sell the right cut to many more markets than were ever possible, and this has driven increased volumes of lamb production.

## Overseas markets

### Q. Why do you sell domestically and overseas?

**A.** We sell domestically, and we export, as different products are demanded around the world, depending on culture and cooking technique. Some



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cultures prefer legs, some shoulders, some racks and loins, and others flap meat and bones.

**Q. How do your company's products fundamentally cater to demand in overseas markets?**

**A.** Our role is to ensure the right product is with the right customer anywhere in the world, when they want it. If this can be achieved, we are able to deliver the best returns for our producer suppliers. Festivals, seasons, and celebrations form a large part of the demand around the world at different times of the year. We operate in a global market that changes daily.

**Q. Has there been a change in the composition of trade?**

**A.** Markets are changing all the time, for reasons such as season, economy and demographics. We need to remain close to our customers to ensure we are adapting our product-offer to match consumer demands.

**Q. Are there any other issues with any given overseas markets?**

**A.** The goal of our industry and Government must continue to be about market access and free trading agreements. Free trading agreements allow us to work with customers in country, on a direct basis, and create

products that best suit consumers. This helps create better farm gate returns.

**Q. What is the benefit of your industry to Australia?**

**A.** The meat processing industry is a huge employer and creator of manufacturing jobs. Wages, farmer returns, foreign earnings and many taxes are earned by our industry.

**Transport and logistics**

**Q. How are your products shipped?**

**A.** All products are containerised. We transport from Dubbo to the port at Sydney, with company-owned 3 x C44 locomotives and rolling stock. The locos are 4400 horse power, each capable of 6100 metric tonnes of trailing tonnage with 62 wagons, 186 TEU. This makes our freight movements some of the most efficient anywhere in the world. In Western Australia we use company road trains in c-double, or road train configuration, to transport container freight from Albany to the port of Fremantle. Sydney and Fremantle are our biggest ports, but we do ship small volumes from Melbourne and Brisbane, if the schedule suits. We then use shipping lines to transport our goods around the globe.

**Q. As a customer of the ocean-going shipping industry, what, in your opinion, does the ocean-going shipping industry do well?**

**A.** It allows exporters to deliver the exact cut at the right time, consistently and efficiently anywhere in the world. You cannot overstate the contribution this has made to the Australian economy, and particularly to rural and regional Australia, over the past 50 years. We need to work together to ensure the right containers are in Australia at the right time, for exporting our farmers products. Many agricultural products are heavy bulk and therefore 20 foot reefer and dry containers are required in high volumes to allow these exports to take place.

**Q. What ONE message would you give to the ocean-going shipping industry?**

**A.** Keep driving efficiencies on every part of our business and the supply chain, if we are to remain competitive.

**Coping with natural disasters**

**Q. What have been the effects on your export business, or your sector, of the Australian drought?**

**A.** This last drought put rural and regional Australia under massive strain. Australia was well-positioned with our market access, to enable farmers' returns on sheep and lambs to remain at relative high levels. We witnessed our farmer suppliers adopt many techniques to ensure our customers continued to be consistently supplied with high quality products. With the drought breaking over major areas of eastern Australia, we are seeing many farmers focus on restocking and, importantly, drought preparedness.

**Q. What have been the effects on the export business of bushfires?**

**A.** Bushfires did not impact the sheep production to near the extent it did other industries. It was a devastating blow to rural and regional Australia on the back of the long running drought. The bushfires did have an extreme impact on our ability to reach Sydney port through rail corridors. They showed that there is a lack of preparation and mitigation of fuel load around these vital arteries of regional economies.

**Q. What have been the effects on your export business or your sector (volumes/value/market share) of COVID-19?**

**A.** COVID has given us many challenges, with the food service markets of fine dining, cruise lines and airlines suffering nearly total loss of business. These industries are major consumers of Australian lamb. COVID has had a massive impact on the entire food service sector around the world. We would predict recovery in this sector to take a significant amount of time.

**Q. How do you see your business, and your sector, adapting to, and recovering from, these disasters?**

**A.** We are working with all our customers in all sectors to help drive recovery and growth in sheep meat consumption. It will take some time, but it can be done. ▲

Further details about Fletcher International Exports can be found at [www.fletchintl.com.au](http://www.fletchintl.com.au)



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