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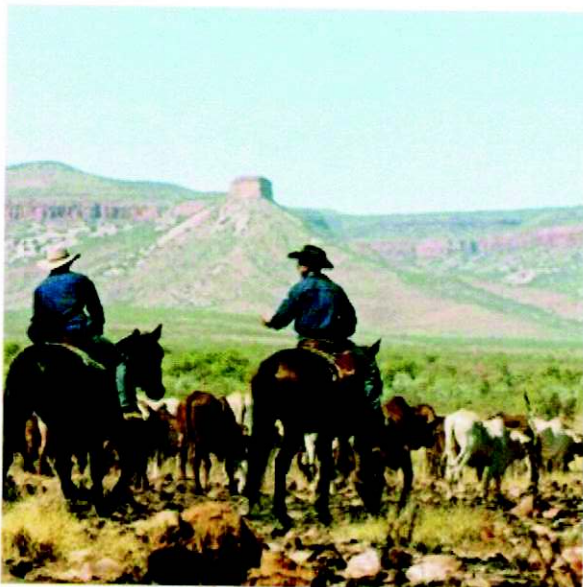

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## WA cool on council reform bid

Melissa Williams,  
Countryman  
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WA's farm lobby groups have rejected a radical proposal to overhaul Cattle Council of Australia to include directly elected producers with voting rights based on herd size.

The nation's biggest cattle operator, Australian Agricultural Company (AAco), last week unveiled a proposed restructure for the peak national body that would replace State-based farm organisation (SFO) membership with a system where individual cattle producers could choose to contribute fees and vote for council representatives based on their cattle numbers and the production zone where they operate.

Under the proposal, a northern, central and southern zone would be established and producers in each region could voluntarily opt-in and pay a fee to the Cattle Council when they purchased their compulsory National Livestock Identification Scheme ear tags.

AAco managing director David Farley said he was unsure what the fee should be, but in his opinion the Cattle Council required an annual revenue stream of \$6 million. The council currently operates on a budget of about \$1 million/year.

"The first thing the industry needs to consider before setting any fees is how much money the Cattle Council actually needs," he said.

Mr Farley said AAco's restructure plan for the council was designed to stimulate discussion about the peak body's future and he planned to put it on the table at the Cattle Council's annual meeting in Longreach next week. The Cattle Council plans to vote on its own restructure proposal at that meeting.

But Mr Farley said the council's reforms did not go far enough to ensure the peak body was more streamlined, responsive, able to deal with specialist beef issues and better direct and control Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA).

He said MLA took strategic direction from the Cattle Council and the council needed a more contemporary business model to ensure it was resourced with intellect and capital to function correctly as the head body of the Australian cattle industry and, in turn, develop and apply good policy through to MLA.

Mr Farley said this year's live export ban debacle was the catalyst for AAco's restructure plan for the Cattle Council.

He said the export ban was an example of how MLA had become a body unto itself because it was poorly directed by industry.

"Our proposed direct membership model for the Cattle Council improves the cattle industry's ability to respond effectively and efficiently as issues arise," he said.

"SFOs still have an important role to play in representing producers on State based issues, such as water and land management, but specialist issues in the beef industry are best handled by a directly elected specialist national beef organisation."

AACO's plan for the Cattle Council would have three governors for each region elected by producer members and another two independently appointed governors to make up a national board.

National decisions would be made by these 11 governors or by a ballot of producers in the zone.

Mr Farley said there was a precedence for direct election structures in the wool, goat and pig sectors and the AACO model was relevant for today's operating environment that required using available technology to achieve fast response times and timely input to policy.

But WA's State farming organisations say the current structure of the Cattle Council and Sheepmeat Council of Australia - and the input to MLA from these national bodies - is adequate.

WA Farmers meat section president Jeff Murray said the Cattle Council's membership should remain based on SFO representation.

He said under the existing system, all cattle and sheep producers had the opportunity to have input to the national body through their SFO and it was more embracing of the whole industry.

"This system also gives the SFOs a stronger voice and if the big producers came on board, that would add further weight to our national representation," he said.

Mr Murray said he would not like the Cattle Council or SCA to mirror the structure of Australian Wool Innovation, where vested interests had potential to hold a lot of power in the industry.

Pastoralists and Graziers Association's (PHA) Cattle Council representative David Lovelock said it did not support a direct election model for the council, but was in favour of the council's proposed structural modifications that would be put to the vote at next week's meeting.

"There are difficulties with direct elections in that big organisations can get too many votes and overrule SFOs that represent thousands of producers," he said. "We need a national body that can represent everyone in the cattle industry."

Mr Lovelock said WA would retain two seats on the Cattle Council executive committee if the council's reforms were endorsed - one for PGA and the other for WA Farmers - and several taskforces would be ratified to focus on specific issues facing the beef sector.

"These taskforces will allow us to better respond to issues, attract wider representation and seek outside expertise if needed."

Mr Lovelock defended the actions of the Cattle Council and MLA during the recent live export ban, saying the Cattle Council councillors held teleconferences every second day and its executive officer was instrumental in negotiations with the Australian and Indonesian governments and industry players during the ban phase.

"We are very happy with the way the Cattle Council has been responding to industry issues and the process by which the council sets priorities and policy and has input to how MLA implements that," he said.

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