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Obituary

Bob Richardson, 21/11/1944 – 21/7/2008



Dr R.A. (Bob) Richardson, farmer, university lecturer, dean and wool industry leader has died aged 64 of prostate cancer. He received the Order of Australia in 2002 for his services to the wool industry. Among other roles, Bob was Chief Executive of Wool International in the 1990s before becoming Dean of the Institute of Land and Food Resources at Melbourne University and Regional Vice Chancellor.

For the last 20 years of his working life, Bob held positions demanding clear sighted rational challenges to irrational policies and fixed political interests.

An agricultural economist from the University of New England, Armidale NSW and Purdue University Indiana, USA, Bob became a leading light in the Australian wool industry at a time when growers, graziers and pastoralists still believed in the primacy of their production; *Australia rode on the sheep's back* as it were and they would set the price of wool, irrespective of world demand.

Bob joined the Australian Wool Corporation in 1977 as Economics Manager. He went on to manage its research and promotional activities and played a central role in wool marketing, including the implementation of the now infamous Reserve Price Scheme. In the 1980s, he established his

reputation as a clear-headed, forceful opponent of wool price stabilisation while accepting industry policy and taking responsibility for new market research, forecasting initiatives and the provision of pricing indicators to improve marketing efficiency.

In the mid 1980s, after a surge in demand, the floor price for wool was increased by some 70 per cent over 2 years. Bob Richardson was almost a lone voice in counselling growers and Board members against raising the price above long-term trends. Despite calls for his head, Bob stood his ground, as difficult as the situation was for growers and processors alike. Stocks and debts increased dramatically in subsequent years and his position was vindicated with the collapse of the scheme in 1991.

Subsequently, as Chairman of Wool International, Bob was responsible for selling down the huge stockpile, acting to ensure the best returns for growers and minimising market damage while fending off woolly-headed approaches from entrepreneurs and politicians with creative sales schemes. Many times colleagues asked him how he managed to continue cogently to defend his position in the face of immense pressures to implement irrational policies. His answer was simple: always apply the economic principles and point out the cost of deviating from their dictates. Bob Richardson stuck to the path of economic rectitude with the highest professional standards.

As Dean of Land and Food Resources at Melbourne University, Bob's vision and plans were vigorously objected to and criticised at the time but subsequently vindicated as inevitable. The restructuring he advocated was fully implemented in due course, shortly after he had returned to his first love, farming.

The first of four boys, Bob was born at Ambleside, Mt Prospect, (near Ballarat) on the renowned 'red earth' country where the family had been spud farmers, cereal and fat lamb producers for generations. He was Captain of Ballarat College, stroke of the crew, a good footballer and a record breaking middle-distance runner. He later took over Ambleside and worked it until the end.

At the University of New England, Bob took every economics subject on offer. Although he loved the land, he was no agricultural fundamentalist, a supporter of price fixing policies or the politics of socialising losses and capitalising gains. At the same time, he was passionate about the battlers of the bush, as in the poetry of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson, and a companionable raconteur.

After completing his PhD at Purdue University, Bob returned to Armidale to teach agricultural economics, play Aussie Rules Football and Bluegrass music. He liked to drink with all the other agricultural economists in the back bar of Bruyn's Hotel where he met the publican's daughter, Pip, whom he married in 1978, a natural and inevitable match.

They built a new farm (Westerly) and house together on Mt Blackwood near Myrniong and later on a beach house at Anglesea where it was hoped Bob would wind down by the sea without suffering too much from rural

withdrawal. However, after a night or two there, he usually went back to feed the stock, move the water pipes, cart hay or mend a fence. Family, friends and farming were all to Bob and, as expected, Bob loved being on the land in his retirement: on the last day of his illness welcoming the overdue rain. He is survived by Pip, Sah, Lachlan and Tim.

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