

At last, a beanie that's comfortable

A bloke who sells and services industrial sewing machines is pitching specially-made Merino beanies to farmers and foresters sick of irritating headwear. **Tim Fulton** reports.

Christchurch-based Greg Barrett has spent more than 30 years in the clothing industry but it was his love of biking that got him thinking about beanies that you can wear properly under a hard hat.

"I'm a mountain biker and it was just through accident I had one of my customers make up some Merino beanies for me which worked underneath cycle helmets. One of the guys I rode with was wearing his at work ... a few of the guys saw it, thought it was great and it just all sort of ballooned out from there."

Like many ventures, his breakthrough was born of a headache.

The Department of Labour was moving to "outlaw" people wearing beanies and caps under hard hats, which are designed to rest directly on the skull.

So Barrett got pro-active, asking a couple of the department's Christchurch staff for their view on his business plan.

"They basically said to me that what I had here was something that needs to be presented out into the marketplace."

So, despite many of Barrett's clothing industry customers falling by the wayside in recent years, the tailor-made "Merinie" beanie has given him a new outlet for his skills.

"This is now actually starting to take over a huge, significant part of my time and thankfully (so) because the clothing industry is dying and the earthquake doesn't help much either."

Plenty of thought has gone into making the Merinie a cut above the cheap synthetic beanie you might be wearing out on the farm today.

Barrett worked up his own patterns, taking into account essentials such as the beanie covering the back of the neck but not the eyes. Another priority was fabric that doesn't aggravate skin, be it from coarse fibre or stitching.

"I'm a huge fan of Merino wool. Basically it operates with temperature so it heats during cold and cools during summer, and it has fantastic wicking qualities – basically it absorbs the moisture."

As he has discovered, the fibre absorbs up to 35% of its own weight in dampness so even though it gets wet, it doesn't feel cold.

"Another factor is whenever you're wearing a beanie, a lot of the time when you're wearing a woollen one they actually drive you nuts (with itchiness) after a while, whereas the merino doesn't do that."

His research also taught him that

many wool fibres currently used in beanies are so thick "that effectively what they are doing is stabbing your head, stabbing your skin which causes the irritation".

Merino fibre, being so fine, deflects away from the skin.

Purely from a mountain-biker's perspective, a beanie needed to be comfortable to wear, warm and absorbent. A farmer's working day is not exactly akin to bike-riding for pleasure, but Barrett says there are qualities in a Merino beanie that translate to farm or forest.

With the temperature qualities it takes away the moisture at a slower rate, reversing the hypothermic risk from sweating followed by rapid cooling.

While he says hypothermia is at the extreme end of farming danger, "I could then see that by people wearing a Merino beanie it could actually start to result in it curing some of those aspects which are health and safety aspects down the track as well".

As odd as it sounds from someone with 30-plus years' experience in the textile trade, Barrett says he's learnt a lot about the qualities of wool in the past two years or so.

"It's just really astounded me, what's there. If you're passionate about something, which I am about this, learning about it has been quite an insight."

The next trick has been promotion and manufacturing.

As a self-confessed "old fashioned business type" he's not about to devote a lot of time and energy to selling product online. Face to face relationships is his go, an example being an early-morning visit to a Rangiora timber plant on the day we met.

"I like to go that extra step, that old-fashioned business way. To me, business is only as good as your last deal and it's a matter of creating a personal relationship so that you can create an ongoing business. That's what the internet can't do, although it does have a part to play in creating that opportunity."

Still, for all that, there's a risk that a larger competitor will jump on his idea and start churning out cheaper imitations.

"That's what you're exposed to and that's why again it's critical to create that relationship with your customer. If your customer trusts you and understands what you're trying to achieve, having their best interest as your focus, then that helps cement that ongoing purchasing relationship. I believe the internet

can't do that because it's easy to click on A site or B site, but there's no emotional tie."

A lasting supply of material sourced from NZ will also be vital to the business.

"I'm extremely passionate about this, because of where I've come from. I've seen the clothing industry being a very, very strong industry..." As an ex employee of the once powerful, now defunct Lane Walker Rudkin, you can see why he isn't impressed at the state of the local trade now.

He sources wool from Auckland-based Fabric Supply and is determined to keep his supply relationship local.

"I will always manufacture them in NZ and I will always use NZ-made fabric as well."

The business just keeps on growing, he says, raising his expectations well beyond being able to sell beanies to a few mates of mates. Still, he's conscious of not being caught with large orders of unsold stock.

He runs a make-to-order business with the exception of stock held for one customer and at this stage he won't be selling through rural retail stores.

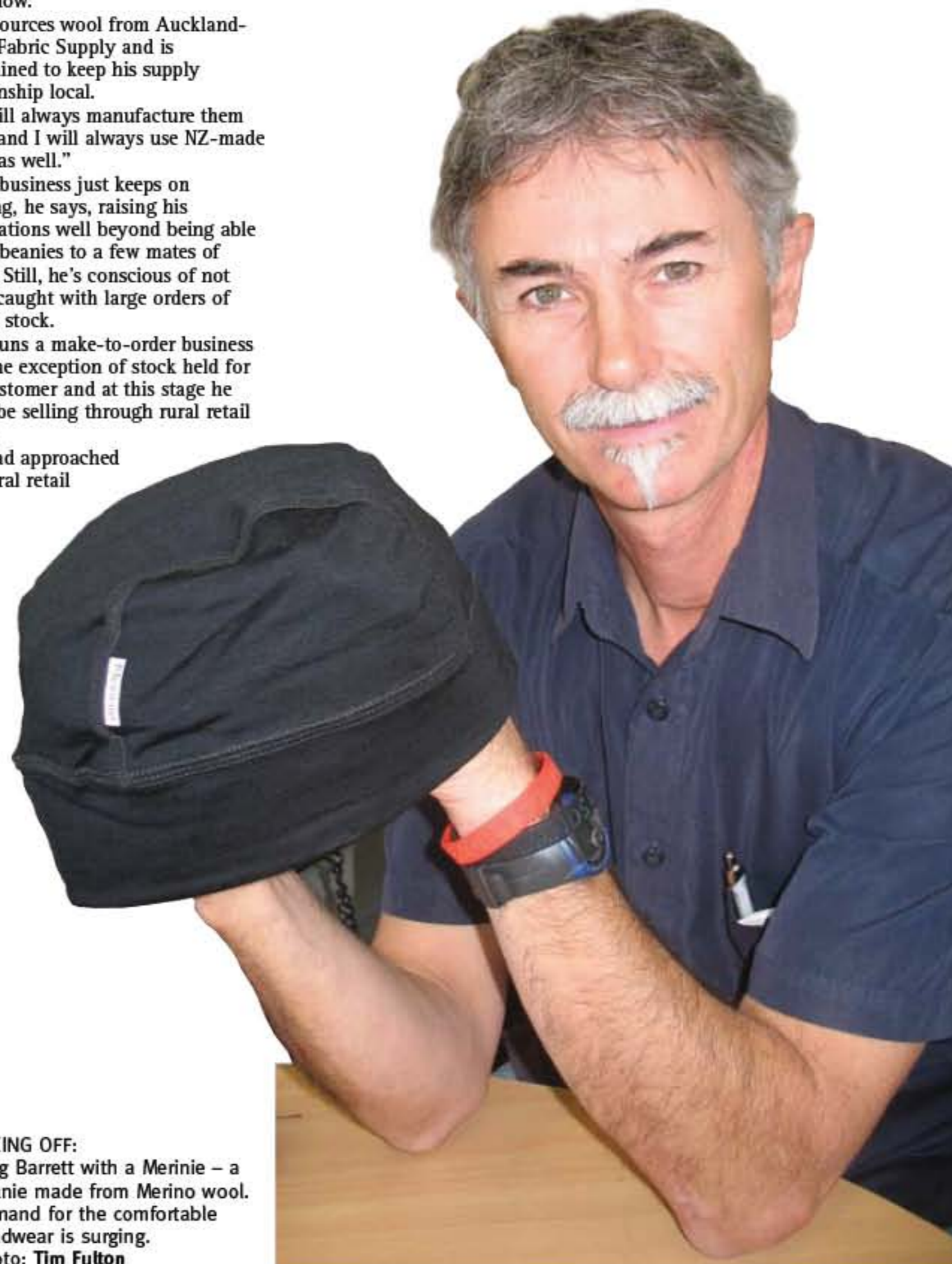
"I had approached one rural retail

on-seller but they said that because I wasn't one of their suppliers they couldn't purchase." Asked whether that felt like a chicken and egg situation, Barrett simply replied: "Exactly."

"I really would prefer to deal with the end user because as soon as I put a retailer in there, then that's adding price to the product as well."

WANT ONE?

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TAKING OFF:
Greg Barrett with a Merinie – a beanie made from Merino wool. Demand for the comfortable headwear is surging.
Photo: **Tim Fulton**