

NEWS

Leroy the labrador is sniffing out footrot

BY CATHERINE MILLER

IMAGINE being able to train a dog to sniff out the footrot organism in sheep just like sniffer dogs can detect drugs being smuggled through customs or truffles growing in the soil.

Struan sheep breeder and former researcher Colin Earl and his neighbour Joanne Griffiths - an experienced dog trainer - are excited they are hot on the scent of a new way for sheep producers to screen their flocks for footrot.

Ms Griffiths has spent the past couple of years training black labrador Leroy to consistently identify a sheep with footrot trimmings attached to it, from five sheep in a race.

"We collected some trimmings from the feet of sheep with footrot through a friend of Colin's in Victoria and put them in a sock and tied it to the sheep's leg and then tied empty socks on each of the other sheep too," she said.

"He (Leroy) makes it look so easy and quick, he can find the sheep we are looking for in five seconds and then sits down on cue in front of that sheep."

Dr Earl and Ms Griffiths are rapt with Leroy's progress in this specialised scent detection and are now seeking further funding through the SA Sheep Industry Fund to replicate this work on larger mobs.

"I thought I had a reasonable chance being a gun dog Leroy would not want to eat the sheep," she said.

"Being a labrador he is very food driven, he has a short coat that doesn't get full of grass seeds and he has



South East neighbours Colin Earl and Joanne Griffiths have been thrilled with the success black lab Leroy has had in consistently identifying a sheep with the footrot scent. Picture by Catherine Miller

a good temperament."

In the next stage of the project, they hope to set up a quarantine area and expose Leroy to sheep with clinical signs of footrot.

"Because this hasn't been done before we are still working out what it looks like," she said.

"We could have the sheep walking across a certain area and Leroy behind them but I think it may be better to have the sheep reasonably spaced out, not all on top of each other and having him go along the race sniffing," she said.

Ms Griffiths says taking Leroy to work on different farms will also be important and hopes farmers will take

an interest in the project and volunteer some of their sheep for training.

"There is no point going to properties where there is 30 per cent of infected sheep. We need to be going to places that have done the hard work and got it down because if there are heaps of animals with footrot there it is too confusing," Dr Earl said.

They are confident Leroy will be able to sniff out virulent footrot which has a pungent odour but will also work on sheep showing few clinical signs of the disease to detect Leroy's sensitivity to the odour.

"We will have to wait and see but we know there are dogs in other fields like COV-

ID-19 detection that can pick up a scent of one in several trillion," Ms Griffiths said.

They will also be looking to test Leroy's abilities in non-infected flocks and ensure Leroy is not easily distracted when on the scent.

Dr Earl hopes with the recent changes to the SA footrot management plan producers will be more open about their footrot status and take proactive steps to try and eradicate it.

If it goes the way he expects he sees huge potential for footrot contractors to have trained dogs to screen flocks to see if they are free of the disease, rather than tipping over large numbers of sheep to inspect their feet.



Leroy the labrador practises looking for footrot in a sheep flock of Prolific Whites. Picture by Catherine Miller

MLA predicts upwards trend for lamb