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Warning: footrot threatens south-west sheep industry

Department of Agriculture, Western Australia

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DURING the past few months footrot has appeared in sheep in the South-West in an area extending from Busselton southwards to Kudardup. This area has only recently been stocked with sheep which have been purchased from many sources. It is probable that there were a few "carriers" amongst these introduced sheep, and that under the favourable conditions of the South-West the infection was able to develop and spread and then to declare itself in clinical form.

The infection appears to have been disseminated mainly from four affected properties from which sheep had been sold to no fewer than 26 other properties in the district. All of these sheep have since been traced and inspected and the infection was found in ten of the flocks concerned; some others are still under investigation. However, under the dry, summer conditions it had not spread to any great extent.

While this is a matter for concern the situation is not as yet serious. The majority of the affected flocks are small and provided all of the infected animals can be detected and removed before the break of the season, eradication of the disease should be possible before it has had time to become firmly established.

However, in this district, with its heavy rainfall, high stocking rates and long growing season, and where many properties have quite large areas of green summer land traversed by brooks, there are all of the elements for costly and widespread outbreaks and unless the infection is promptly eradicated a situation might arise in the spring which could render sheep raising in this area uneconomical.

This does not appear to be appreciated by farmers who have had no previous experience of footrot and would prefer to retain and treat the carriers rather than eliminate them by sale for slaughter, which provides the surest and most prompt means of eradication.

Should the disease persist into the winter and spring months and become firmly established in the flock, its eradication will then become a most difficult problem, and very heavy losses are likely to be sustained until this has been achieved. The full cooperation of flock owners in the application of control and eradication measures is therefore essential.

All of the affected flocks have been included in a summer eradication programme. This is now in progress and during its course every foot of every sheep on each affected property will be pared and subjected on two separate occasions to a careful examination for the detection and
ALL "CARRIERS" MUST BE ELIMINATED

removal of the "carriers". On most properties this may be expected to result in complete eradication.

However, it is again emphasised that the "carriers" should be promptly eliminated by slaughter rather than that curative treatment should be attempted. Treatment cannot be relied upon to eradicate the disease from a flock and is not recommended, since apparently-cured cases may relapse and give rise to new outbreaks during the winter and spring.

New infections have also appeared in the Mt. Barker-Rocky Gully-Frankland area, where there are five flocks now under quarantine and in the Boyup Brook-Bridgetown-Manjimup area where six quarantines have been imposed.

Eradication programmes are in operation in all of these flocks and there is no reason why they should not prove successful. These happenings after more than 12 months of apparent freedom from footrot have again emphasised the need for constant vigilance and unless this continues to be exercised, footrot could again become a source of serious loss.

Foot abscess, which is often prevalent during the winter months, tends to cloud the issue. During recent years, outbreaks of lameness have almost invariably been found, upon investigation, to have resulted from foot abscess and there is a growing tendency to attribute every outbreak of lameness to this condition and to discount the possibility of footrot and neglect to report it. Foot abscess usually clears up and lameness disappears with the advent of dry weather, whereas lameness resulting from footrot may persist well into and at times throughout the summer months, though at a lower level. It is important that all outbreaks of lameness should continue to be reported and particularly those which continue into the summer.

Both the inner claws on the hind feet of this sheep are malformed, with horny deposits on the inner surface. The outer claws on each foot are clean and healthy although somewhat overgrown. In the right-hand picture, one of the misshapen claws had been trimmed with the secateurs exposing a pocket of infection in which the footrot organisms are still active.
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