FranklinVets

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO Foot Scald and Rot

Foot Scald and Foot Rot are bacterial infections that affect the feet of hooved animals such as sheep, goats, and cattle. The bacteria thrive in wet conditions, which means that in the tropical Auckland region, the disease is seen throughout much of the year.

Infection begins with inflammation between the toes and can progress to separation of the hoof wall and sole as bacteria invade the tissues. A distinctively foul odour is often present. If you cut away the separated horn, you may find soft, grey, rotting tissue underneath.

In sheep, the initial bacterium involved is *Dichelobacter*, which causes mild inflammation and a white, sticky film between the toes. This early stage is known as "Foot Scald." Once skin defences are weakened, a more aggressive bacterium, *Fusobacterium*, can take hold, progressing the condition to "Foot Rot." These bacteria live in the soil, making this a whole-flock (and often yearly repeat) problem that requires a broad management approach.

Treating affected individuals

During an outbreak, **every foot of every animal should be examined.** Overgrown hooves may need to be pared away to identify infections. Hoof trimmers must be disinfected regularly, between animals and mobs. Dipping them in a small container of disinfectant works well. Installing concrete in handling areas provides a hard surface that is easier to disinfect trimmings. Feet should then be checked every three weeks, but any animal showing signs of new lameness should be examined immediately.

For mild cases of foot scald, a topical spray applied between the toes is often sufficient. If the condition has progressed to foot rot, injectable/topical antibiotics and a veterinary check are likely needed. Re-check animals after one week and re-treat if necessary. Long-acting pain relief is essential for animal welfare. Severely affected animals should be moved to dry, upland pasture, or stabled on dry hay if needed, ensuring that their nutritional requirements are still met.

Foot Scald

Foot Rot

The flock approach

- **Breeding for resistance** is one long-term management strategy. Susceptibility to foot rot appears to be heritable, so culling repeat offenders can reduce the infection source in a farming setting. If these animals will remain on your property permanently, avoid breeding from them.
- **Laying lime** in muddy areas such as gateways, around water troughs, and paths can alter the pH and make the environment less suitable for bacterial survival.
- **Foot Bathing** animals in a fresh 10% zinc sulphate solution helps disinfect and harden hooves while supplementing hoof health with zinc. Do **not** use copper-based treatments for sheep, goats, or alpacas, as they are highly susceptible to copper toxicity. After bathing, spray feet with purple spray and allow them to dry before returning animals to pasture.
- **Resting paddocks** is important. The milder bacteria can survive in the soil for up to **10 months**, while the more aggressive bacteria survive for just a few **weeks.** If you can move animals to clean, dry areas and leave infected paddocks fallow, you will drastically reduce environmental contamination—although this can be difficult on lifestyle blocks.
- **Vaccination** with **FootVax** can help reduce disease incidence. While not a complete cure due to strain variation, it is useful in flock control, particularly for sheep. Goat response to the vaccine is more variable, so effectiveness may vary. The vaccination schedule involves an initial dose, a booster 4 weeks later, and then 6-monthly boosters—ideally given just before high-risk seasons such as spring and autumn.

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