

Wanted: A sheep in sheep's clothing

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Australian scientists say they are looking for the ugliest merino lambs they can find in a study that may challenge the dominance of synthetic fibers.

The researchers from the University of Adelaide and the South Australian Research and Development Institute are looking for sheep with unusual wool that might provide the keys to unlocking the genetic pathway to superior wool quality.

Professor Phil Hynd said such lambs are usually culled because they may have uneven wool, strange fibers, or even highly wrinkled skin.

"These lambs, typically viewed as worthless, are in fact highly valuable to the industry, because one of the most efficient ways to identify the genes that impact on certain wool traits is to study animals that have rare or extreme features," Hynd said. "Ultimately (through DNA-based technology) it's the ugly sheep that will help us make quantum leaps to advance the qualities of Australian merino wool to make it more stretchy, less scratchy, shinier and easier to spin, and to compete better against synthetic fibers."

Hynd notes the wool industry makes incremental improvements to wool quality -- about 1 percent a year. But he says his study could lead to dramatic improvements in sheep genetics.

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