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By BRIAN CLANCY
THE chemical alternative to surgical mulesing could be commercially available by the end of this year, according to the head of Cobbett Technology, Peter St Vincent-Welsh.

Mr St Vincent-Welsh and Cobbett are piloting their hope on SkinTract — where Merino wools are treated with the household chemical sodium laurel sulphate to develop a bare breed.

And if a research flock which displayed at the University of Melbourne’s Dookie campus this week is any indicator, they have good reason to be optimistic.

SkinTract, with the assistance of research funding from Australian Wool Innovation, has been four years in development.

Mansfield grazer Mark Ritchie — who had 609 Merino ewes treated in June as part of ongoing research — is already a convert.

"There is no trauma and the results as you can see on some these young ewes is as good as mulesing," Mr Ritchie said.

On display at Dookie yesterday, visitors were able to inspect non-mulesed, mulesed and wools treated with SkinTract.

Mr St Vincent-Welsh said SkinTract was currently undertaking registration with the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority.

"We’ve passed many of the modules and we still have a few to go," he said.

With SkinTract, wools are treated with an injectable solution delivered under high pressure to the breech area.

The treated skin eventually forms a scar tissue which falls off to leave bare skin.

Mr St Vincent-Welsh estimated the cost at about $1 for the chemical, in addition to a surgeon’s labour costs. 

AWI manager of technologies Geoff Lindon was also optimistic with the research to date.

Mr Lindon said SkinTract was more effective when applied to wools, rather than as lambs when surgical mulesing is normally performed.

He said there was still a lot of work required on developing the correct dosage rates as there was a lot of variability between sheep.

Mr Lindon said the research results had indicated that mulesing of some form was required on those sheep with either dry, brood or thin scores of 3 and higher.

"Those with scores 2 or less can get by without mulesing," he said.

* It’s a powder bag, Page 110