



WHAT'S IN A TALE...A SHOW LAMB'S TAIL?

By

Jerry A. Newman, Extension 4-H Youth Development Specialist
Department of Human Development

Jan R. Busboom Extension Animal Scientist
Department of Animal Sciences

Washington State University

Tail docking is tail docking...right? No, that is not the case for some show lamb exhibitors and their families. The California Farm Bureau and the California Veterinary Medical Association are tackling a show lamb issue that few in animal agriculture are addressing; short tail docking (removal of the tail) of show lambs. At first you may wonder why is this a problem? Some exhibitors believe ultra short tail docking improves the appearance of show lambs to the judge. Ultra short tails however, can cause sanitation and health problems for lambs.

Tail docking of lambs by the commercial sheep industry is a standard management practice that helps prevent fecal and urinary contamination of the hindquarters, and facilitates shearing. Accumulation of fecal material on the hindquarters of lambs is very undesirable because the feces can contaminate the carcass. Therefore, packers may reject lambs with hindquarters that are obviously soiled. Further, soiled wool around the hindquarters attracts flies and encourages them to lay eggs; the resulting maggots may feed on the skin and flesh of the animal. Flystrike can be a major problem in sheep that are not docked.

The standard commercial practice is to remove the tail at the distal termination of the caudal tail fold. The caudal folds are the folds of skin that extend from the body on both sides of the anus and terminate on the bottom side of the tail. When a lamb is docked, the tail must be left long enough so that when the lamb lifts it's tail to defecate the caudal folds on either side are raised and the feces are directed away from the body. This reduces fecal contamination of the wool and helps prevent blowfly strike. If tails are very short, the caudal folds are not raised and soft feces are more likely to soil the area below and on either side of the tail. Docking a tail extremely short or completely removing it not only contributes to fecal contamination of the hindquarters but also increases the incidence of rectal prolapses. Genetics, diet, and conditions causing the lamb to cough such as dust or disease can also influence the incidence of prolapses. The exhibition of agricultural animals at fairs, whether through open shows or youth livestock programs,

directly affects agriculture. The general public makes no distinction between the commercial industry that produces food and fiber and the "show" industry that may promote animal appearance over function. In the latter case, the tail is sometimes docked shorter than necessary because this practice gives some lambs the appearance of a more level rump and more muscular leg. However, it does not enhance the breeding quality or health of the animal. The agricultural industry cannot justifiably or authoritatively defend the cosmetic tail docking practice.

The missions of the 4-H Youth livestock programs are to: develop knowledge and skills in animal agriculture, develop life skills, and develop leadership skills in youth. These skills aid youth in becoming responsible citizens. We should encourage them to practice the highest standards in animal agriculture. Therefore, all sheep shown at 4-H Youth shows should be docked in a manner that does not compromise the animal's health and well-being. As a working guideline we recommend that lambs be docked so that at the show the tail (dock) is long enough to be lifted. Moreover, the stress caused by docking increases with age, therefore docking should be performed early in life and certainly before the lambs are two weeks of age. The tail should be healed at the time of show and any animal that has been redocked, except for a medically justified reason, should be ineligible for show.

c:tail docking recommendation May 2008