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Market Lamb Docking- The Better Way

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MARKET LAMB DOCKING – THE BETTER WAY

Tail removal or docking of lambs by the commercial sheep industry is a standard management practice. When properly docked, the tail or dock will be long enough that when lifting the tail to defecate, the caudal folds on the under side of the tail are raised.

This helps direct the feces away from the body, preventing contamination of the hindquarters. The docked tail will help prevent fly strike and provide coverage of the perineal and vulvar areas, protecting against harsh weather and not interfere with reproductive processes. Ideally, docking should be done within the first two weeks following birth, using one of the following methods, knife; shears; hot iron pincers or chisels; emasculator; Burdizzo pincers; or elastrators.

In recent years many 4-H and FFA Jr. Livestock exhibitors and show lamb producers have adopted the practice of sever tail docking. It is presumed that such docking improves the eye appeal of the animal, making the rump look longer and squarer and the leg to appear larger and more full. Such procedures have been termed “**extreme tail docking in sheep**” by the American Veterinary Medical Association. The cosmetic tail dock typically is shorter than the caudal tail fold and has evolved to the point of surgical removal of caudal vertebrae, often resulting in the loss of innervation (nerves) to the rectum and anal sphincter that comes from sacral vertebra 3 to caudal vertebra 5, predisposing lambs to rectal prolapse. The condition is painful, and repair is unprofitable. Therefore, docking lambs’ tails to the proper length is necessary to avoid negative physiological and economic consequences.

In a letter to the National 4-H Program Leader and signed by the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Sheep Industry, the American Farm Bureau, and the United States Animal Health Association, concerns were expressed about **extreme tail** docking, recognizing that docking sheep tails is desirable when used for hygienic purposes and to minimize fly strike. However, **extreme tail docking** can increase the incidence of rectal prolapse and is unacceptable for the health and welfare of sheep.

We ask that you adopt the following rule for exhibited sheep:

Animals born after January 1, 2002, will be accepted for exhibition only if tails are not docked shorter than the levels of the distal end of the caudal tail fold. We believe that adopting this rule will promote uniformity and improve the health and welfare of show sheep across the country.

In compliance with this recommendation, the Utah Jr. Livestock Association, by a majority vote, passed a motion to initiate such standards at all state funded livestock shows, utilizing the 2002 and 2003 show seasons as educational opportunities and phase-in years.