

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE FAWC REPORT ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF CASTRATION AND TAIL DOCKING FOR THE WELFARE OF LAMBS

Introduction

In 1994 the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) report on the welfare of sheep raised concerns about the pain caused by routine castration and tail docking of lambs. Subsequent Government-funded research on behavioural and physiological responses provided evidence that lambs of all ages experience pain and distress during both procedures.

In 2004 a Working Group to investigate castration and tail docking was established by FAWC and after a public consultation and the collection of evidence from a range of individuals and organisations the current report was published in 2008.

A copy of the full FAWC report and its recommendations is available at <http://www.fawc.org.uk/pdf/report-080630.pdf> or a hard copy can be obtained from the FAWC Secretariat, Area 5A, 9 Millbank c/o Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3JR.

The Government attaches great importance to the recommendations of FAWC. Listed below are the Government's responses to each of the recommendations and the action that is intended where appropriate.

This response has been produced on behalf of the Governments of Scotland, England and Wales.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

FAWC recommendations are shown in italics and have been grouped in a different order from how they appear in the report – the Government response is given below each group of recommendations

1. Health and welfare planning

100. When lambs are to be castrated, this decision should be agreed with the farm's veterinary surgeon as part of the farm's health and welfare plan.

124. When the tails of lambs are to be docked, this decision should be agreed with the farm's veterinary surgeon as part of the farm's health and welfare plan.

145. Castration and tail docking should only be undertaken after a formal analysis of the risks to the lamb's health and welfare, in conjunction with the farm's veterinary surgeon and as part of the farm's health and welfare plan.

The Government agrees that ideally a written health and welfare plan should be prepared for each flock with appropriate veterinary and technical advice as recommended in the current Codes of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Sheep (the "Welfare Code") and that this plan should include the need for, timing and method of castration

and tail docking. Farmers may also need to seek business advice on the viability of finishing lambs at an earlier age depending on expected feed prices and market conditions.

The Government will consult on introducing an appropriate amendment to the Welfare Code when the Code is next reviewed.

2. Timing

101. When castration is necessary, lambs should be castrated as early as practically possible after a secure maternal bond has been established, but not usually before they are 24 hours old.

125. When tail docking is necessary, lambs should be docked as early as practically possible after a secure maternal bond has been established, but not usually before they are 24 hours old.

The Government agrees that this is good practice and will consult on introducing an appropriate amendment to the Welfare Code when the Code is next reviewed.

3. Legal restrictions

102. Castration of lambs above the age of 3 months should only be undertaken by a veterinary surgeon using pain relief.

It is already a legal requirement that only a veterinary surgeon should castrate a lamb aged 3 months or more and that an anaesthetic must be used. The need for additional longer term pain relief is a matter for the veterinary surgeon to consider.

126. Tail docking of lambs above the age of 3 months should only be undertaken by a veterinary surgeon using pain relief.

The Government will consult on amending legislation to introduce this requirement.

103. Surgical castration should be prohibited except when performed by a veterinary surgeon using pain relief.

131. Surgical tail docking should be prohibited except when performed by a veterinary surgeon using pain relief.

The Government will consult on amending legislation in this area. Methods of castration and tail docking using rubber rings, clamps and combined methods and tail docking using a hot iron would continue to be permitted.

4. Pain relief

99. All parties concerned should work towards the ideal situation where all male lambs are either not castrated or, when this is necessary, castrated using pain relief.

104. Pain relief reduces the impact of castration on welfare and should be used when and wherever possible. Any decisions about pain management and its relief should be made in discussion with a veterinary surgeon.

127. Pain relief reduces the impact of tail docking on welfare and should be used when and wherever possible. Any decisions about pain management and its relief should be made in discussion with a veterinary surgeon.

105. When practical methods of administering pain relief have been devised and demonstrated under farm conditions, the law concerning castration should be changed to require the use of these. Until then, existing castration methods – with the exception of surgical castration – should continue to be permitted.

106. Research should be urgently directed towards the development of practical methods for delivering pain relief during castration under farming conditions and for different ages of lambs.

150. The Government, together with industry, should support the development of methods of delivering local anaesthetic appropriate for use by the sheep industry under field conditions.

The Government agrees that it would be desirable to use pain relief for castration and tail docking when these procedures are necessary but that practical methods of administering pain relief suitable for use under typical farm conditions need to be developed before this becomes possible in most situations. The Government agrees that research should be directed towards developing practical delivery systems for local anaesthetics and that to obtain practical results this research should be done in conjunction with the industry. Previous research identified needleless local anaesthetic injectors as a possible solution which could be investigated further although there were practical difficulties concerning their use in the field. The Government will therefore investigate the most appropriate methods of funding such research in conjunction with industry bodies.

107. Methods of castration should be re-assessed once practical methods of delivering effective pain relief have been developed, and in any case within five years time.

The Government agrees that if practical methods of delivering acute or long-term pain relief are developed it would be appropriate to re-assess permitted methods of castration.

151. The Government, together with industry, should implement as quickly as possible the authorisation of an approved local anaesthetic for sheep.

The Government would encourage the veterinary pharmaceutical industry to develop a local anaesthetic specifically authorised for sheep but cannot require them to do so. The authorisation of all veterinary medicines, including a local anaesthetic for use in a particular species, falls under the Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2008 and is a matter for the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) after presentation of data on quality, safety and efficacy by the manufacturers of the product. It will be for a pharmaceutical company to decide on commercial grounds if they consider that the associated costs are justified by the possible return from future sales of the product. If practical methods of

delivering local anaesthetic are developed it is hoped that the size of the market for the product in future would justify the costs of authorisation for sheep. However as the report states, local anaesthetic authorised for other species is currently available for use in sheep under the "cascade" system. This requires that a withdrawal period of at least 28 days is observed before treated animals can be killed for human consumption, but this will not interfere with normal rearing of animals to slaughter weight.

5. Rubber rings

108. Rubber rings for castration, and the equipment to apply them, should be designed and manufactured to specifications which result in an effective seal when fitted and prevent them from being applied to animals above defined age limits. Approved standards should be introduced for these specifications.

109. The potential of very tight rings or equivalent for pain relief through nerve destruction should be investigated.

Defining suitable specifications for rubber rings and investigating the potential use of very tight rings appear to be potential research requirements. The Government will consider the opportunities for supporting such research in conjunction with the industry and equipment manufacturers.

6. Other research requirements

110. There should be further studies of the practical applications of immunocastration and of consumer concerns about this method.

The Government considers that it would be most appropriate for a pharmaceutical company to undertake such research should they wish to develop a commercial product for immunocastration of sheep. If such a product did become available the Government would support the provision of information to reassure consumers about the safety of the product.

129. Further research should be directed towards gaining a greater understanding of the aetiology of flystrike in sheep; assessment of the long term effects of tail docking on welfare; and development of practical approaches to reduce the pain of tail docking.

The Government agrees that these may be worthwhile areas for possible future research. The possibility of genetic improvements to improve resistance to flystrike including breeding sheep that shed wool naturally could also be explored.

146. The Government should introduce a system to monitor the number of lambs that are castrated and tail docked by the various methods, to demonstrate that improvements are being made.

The Government will consider the possible arrangements for monitoring that could be introduced, including obtaining this information at farm assurance inspections or funding repeatable surveys. This information will be most useful if it allows analysis of results to identify the different sectors of the sheep industry where there are different opportunities for improvement.

149. *Further research should be directed towards the assessment and reduction of chronic pain following castration and tail docking.*

Some basic research on chronic responses to castration and tail docking in sheep and other species is already funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). The Government would encourage further relevant work in this area.

7. Recommendations specifically to the industry

128. *Tail docking for cosmetic reasons cannot be justified: breed society standards which encourage tail docking for appearance or cosmetic reasons should be re-examined in the light of animal welfare considerations.*

The Government agrees with this recommendation which is addressed to breed societies.

130. *Where chemical products are used for the control and prevention of flystrike, on-farm management and health planning should pay particular attention to the correct timing and application methods of such products in order for them to be most effective.*

The Government agrees with this recommendation which is matter of good practice for the use of any such product. The Government recognises that the availability of suitable chemical products to control flystrike has been significantly reduced in recent years.

147. *Sheep farmers, the meat industry, operators of farm assurance schemes and retailers should implement the Welfare Code, which requires careful consideration of the need for castration and tail docking, and should introduce measures to avoid these mutilations where possible.*

The Welfare Code is primarily intended for livestock keepers. The Government agrees that the meat industry, operators of farm assurance schemes and retailers should encourage farmers to follow the Welfare Code recommendations requiring the careful consideration of the need for castration and tail docking where possible.

148. *Retailers and others in the food supply chain should not require castration of lambs and should reward farmers for adoption of a welfare-oriented policy on castration and tail docking, avoiding these mutilations where possible.*

This recommendation is aimed at retailers and others in the food supply chain. The Government suggests that if retailers do specify castration of lambs over a certain age this should only be on the basis of clear evidence of impaired meat quality. Further studies by the industry on meat quality in uncastrated lambs reared in different ways would therefore be appropriate.

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