



Photos: Ian Evans

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For RURAL SOLUTIONS SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND
AUSTRALIAN WOOL INNOVATION (FORMERLY NSW DPI)

While most sheep producers have years of experience in docking lambs' tails, how many are privy to best practice processes, particularly when it comes to tail length? The following article reveals that the best practice outcome for the lamb is not just what looks good but highlights the importance of correct tail length and tail docking procedures.

Under cover: Correct tail length for ewes (left) and wethers (right).

Tail length in lambs — the long and short of it

A standard management practice in any sheep breeding enterprise is docking lamb's tails and many producers debate the correct length a docked tail should be — or perhaps give it no consideration at all.

Tail docking is carried out to increase cleanliness and reduce flystrike, but final tail length is important to achieve the best outcome for the lamb.

Docking the tail at the correct length enables the lamb to control its movement and continue directing faeces and urine away from the body to prevent dirty hindquarters, which can result in flystrike.

Correct tail length in ewe lambs also protects the vulva and the area around the anus from harsh weather, which may have implications for reproductive performance and result in a higher incidence of vulval cancers.

Severe tail docking can also predispose lambs to rectal prolapse due to nerve damage.

Best practice guidelines

Kondinin Group, in partnership with the Livestock Contractors Association, have produced the National Mulesing Accreditation Manual, written by industry expert, Ian Evans and funded by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI).

The guidelines recommend that the best tail length for mulesed sheep is one where the healed tail just covers the tip of the vulva in ewes. This usually means docking immediately below the third joint space (see Figure 1).

Tails docked shorter than the tip of the vulva length or third joint in ewes, increase the risk of flystrike compared with a three-joint tail, and can lead to the development of vulval cancer in some ewes.

Crossbred, wether and ram lambs can be docked one joint shorter than ewe lambs. Unmulesed lambs should not have their tails docked any longer than their mulesed contemporaries.

Ewe tails docked longer than the tip of the vulva, or third joint, are difficult to shear and crutch, can heal abnormally, and make sheep more susceptible to staining, dagginess, and flystrike.

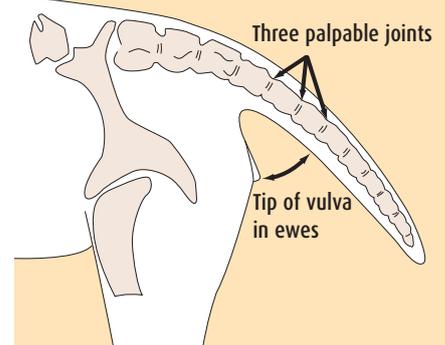
The healed tail aims to protect the vulval and anal areas. Sheep can lift a three-joint tail so wool above and surrounding the base of the tail is well clear of urine or faeces as it passes from the body.

Best practice guidelines also advise that the tails of sheep mulesed at marking usually heal up to 10 millimetres shorter than their originally docked length and leave wool-bearing skin on the upper surface of

At a glance

- Length is critical when docking lambs' tails to maximise hindquarter cleanliness and minimise the risk of cancer in ewes.
- The best length is where a healed tail just covers the tip of the vulva in ewe lambs.
- Careful and correct tail docking procedures will minimise pain in lambs and promote optimal healing of the wound.

FIGURE 1 Recommended tail length



Source: Adapted from NSW DPI



Photo: Ian Evans

Cleaning: Keep the knife blade clean using a wire brush, always brush away from the gas jet with air and a solvent. It is advisable to carry two or three spare clean jets in a small, sealed container with other mulesing equipment.



Photo: Ian Evans

Knives: Lamb marking knives come in two main types — a blade and hook combination (top) and a blade and serrated clamp combination (bottom).

the tail which tends to reduce the extent of the shrinkage.

Tools of the trade

A number of methods are used to dock lamb tails including hot (gas) knives, sharp knives and elastrator rings.

The hot knife reduces the shock caused by blood loss in the lambs because the heat cauterises blood vessels in the tail as it cuts.

Lambs appear to suffer less initial pain than with other methods of de-tailing, and mother-up more quickly.

The hot knife produces a moist, open wound, which heals more slowly than a sharp knife wound.

If flies are present the hot knife wound can be more susceptible to blowfly strike unless an effective registered insecticide is applied.

When using a hot knife to dock the tail, push the skin of the tail towards the lamb's body to locate the joint required. Place the blade on this joint and gently squeeze the lever. It will take about two seconds to cut through the average tail if the blade is operating at the correct temperature.

If the blade is too hot it will cut the tail off too quickly without sealing the blood vessels.

This can cause excessive tissue damage, which will delay healing.

If the blade is too cold the operation requires a lot more effort and is too slow. Blood vessels will seal poorly.

It is critical operators using the hot knife are skilled in their use to ensure they maintain the correct knife temperature.

Lamb marking knives come in two main types: the first combines a blade for de-tailing and opening of the scrotum during castration, with a hook for removing the testicles. The second combines a blade and a serrated clamp for testicle removal. This second type comes in several forms.

When using a sharp knife, cut off the tail at the recommended length. It is important to push the bare skin on the underside of the tail forward, towards the body of the lamb, with the knife before cutting so the severed skin slightly overlaps the bone.

This ensures that when the wound heals there is no wool-bearing skin on the underside or tip of the tail, where it can become soiled attracting flies.

Sever the tail at bone joints, as cuts through the bones are slower healing and difficult to protect from flystrike. To avoid operator injury, sever the tail by keeping your elbow in contact with your hip and using a sideways body movement.

When lambs are being mulesed at marking, do not use elastrator rings for tail docking as excess skin will be removed beyond the correct ring site. Precise control over tail cover length using elastrator rings is almost impossible to achieve.

After tail wounds heal, sheep tail-docked with rings are susceptible to flystrike because of the wool left on the end and underside of the tail.

Keep it clean

Keep knives as clean as possible. If the knife is being used to cut tails and castrate it will be in constant use. If this is the case, do not dunk the knife into a disinfectant container between lambs. Simply use the knife until the build-up of blood becomes excessive, then thoroughly wash in the 'wash-down' container in a disinfecting container.

The knife may need sharpening by this time so the routine would be wash, sharpen, soak in disinfectant.

If being used in this way it can be faster to have two knives, one in use and one sharpened and soaking in the disinfectant.

At the end of each pen the used knife is washed-sharpened-soaked and so on. **FA**

MORE INFORMATION ► For further information on Kondinin Group training courses go to www.kondinin.com.au/training or for a list of accredited mulesing contractors go to the National Mulesing Assurance Program website www.nmap.com.au.

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Photo: Ian Evans



Technique: Skill is required when using a hot knife to avoid excessive tissue damage. Correct technique with the hot knife (above and inset) reduces the shock caused by blood loss.



Photo: Ian Evans



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Variations: A range of hot knife holders illustrating varying degrees of safety.