

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE WELFARE OF SHEEP

1. Food and Water

1.1 Food

Sheep should have access to a diet, which is nutritionally adequate to maintain health and meet the appropriate physiological requirements for growth, pregnancy, lactation and to withstand cold exposure.

In all systems of management, continual assessment should be made of the needs of the sheep in relation to the amount, quality and continuity of feed supply.

Sheep should be excluded, as far as possible, from toxic plants and other substances suspected of being deleterious to their health.

1.2 Water

Sheep should have access to water; regular assessment should be made of the quality and quantity of water supply.

Mechanical equipment controlling the delivery of water should be inspected regularly, and frequently in hot weather, and kept in good working order. It is also essential that a water supply is maintained in freezing weather when pipes are liable to freeze up.

The quality of water provided should be adequate to maintain sheep health. Drinking water, which contains potentially toxic levels of salts, or other deleterious substances, should be monitored and managed to minimise deleterious effects.

Where sufficient good quality water to maintain health cannot be provided, the sheep should be moved to other areas where an adequate supply is available. As a guide, sheep should not be deprived of water for more than 36 hours. This period should be reduced in the event of hot weather.

It is essential that sheep confined in areas where foraging is not possible e.g. shearing sheds are not deprived of water for a period in excess of 36 hours.

2. Protection from Climatic Extremes, Natural Disasters

All reasonable precaution should be taken to minimise the effects of weather that produce cold stress in sheep. Freshly shorn sheep and new-born lambs are particularly susceptible. In particular early lambing in flocks requires special attention in the form of shelter and feed provision. It is essential that adequate feed, water and shelter be provided, particularly in early lambing flocks or early shorn sheep.

3. Supervision

Owners and managers, including absentee owners and managers, should ensure that sheep are inspected with sufficient frequency to ensure that they are in sound and healthy condition. The frequency and thoroughness of inspection should be related to the likelihood of risk to welfare of the sheep in relation to food, water, and protection against natural disasters. Sheep grazing under more extensive conditions require variable supervision according to the density of stocking, availability of suitable feed, reliability of water supply, age, pregnancy status, climatic conditions and management practices.

4. Management Practices

4.1 General

A large number of husbandry/management practices are required in any sheep farming enterprise.

Restraint used on sheep should be the minimum necessary to efficiently carry out the required procedures.

Management procedures carried out on sheep should be performed by competent persons or under the direct supervision of an experienced operator.

Relevant hygienic precautions should be undertaken.

4.2 Handling and Movement

There are times when sheep need to be handled for close inspection or shifted to another place. It is essential that the catcher handles the sheep gently to reduce stress to individual sheep and to other sheep nearby.

If drafting facilities are not available, sheep may be caught, but not pulled, by one leg. If carrying is necessary, they should not be lifted by the wool.

Sheep should be moved quietly through yards with the minimum forcing by dog or person. Care should be taken with gates to avoid injury to sheep.

Precautions should be taken to prevent smothering of closely yarded sheep. Lambs and weaners are at particular risk.

The use of dogs and goading devices for handling sheep should be limited to the minimum needed to complete the procedures. Dogs that bite should be effectively muzzled while working and restrained when not working.

4.3 Shearing

It is normal practice to shear sheep annually. Additional limited shearing in the form of wiggling and crutching may be required at other times of the year to minimise impairment of vision, and the incidence of stained wool, respectively.

Sheep should be handled sympathetically during shearing by a competent shearer. Owners and managers have a duty to make it clear to shearers that the use of excessive force is not permitted.

Because shearing is stressful, managers should attempt to avoid undue handling and exposure to adverse weather. Sheep should be returned to food and water as soon as possible after shearing, and certainly not spend longer than 36 hours without at least water and preferably food as well.

Where circumstances indicate, shearing cuts should be treated to prevent infection and fly strike.

4.4 Shearing dates

Shearing is permitted from 15th October to 15th of March using standard combs.

Cover combs may be used from 15th September until the 30th April.

The only shearing permitted outside these periods will be of animals which are slaughtered off the shears. The slaughter should take place within 2 hours if the animals are not penned in the building and in any case not later than 24 hours post shearing.

4.5 Paring of feet

Sheep with poor hoof conformation, or habitually on soft ground require regular foot paring.

4.6 Horn Trimming

The horns of rams, and some wethers may need to be cut back to avoid injury from an ingrown horn. The amount of horn removed should be limited to avoid damage to soft tissue and associated bleeding.

4.7 Lambing

Ewe flocks under grazing conditions should be disturbed as little as possible. However, the flocks should be under adequate surveillance to ensure that ewes having difficulty are given attention, and orphan lambs are dealt with.

4.8 Orphan Lambs

Where orphan and stray lambs can be identified they should either be humanely killed or given attention. Fostering is a realistic option; especially on small farms. Some will need colostrum or colostrum substitutes, then milk on a regular basis. Warmth and shelter should be provided. Weak lambs with very little chance of survival should be destroyed humanely.

5. Husbandry Procedures - Surgical

5.1 General

Surgical procedures by their nature cause pain and stress, but this can be reduced with minimal restraint and competent operators.

Strict attention should be paid to the suitability of the work area in which the operation is to be performed, the catching facilities and the type and amount of restraint. Instruments should be adequately maintained and sterilised prior to use. Proper hygiene should be practised and the animals given adequate after care.

5.2 Ear marking

Ear marking instruments should be sharp, with the cutting edges undamaged, so as to prevent tearing of the ear.

Ear tagging can cause some tearing of the ears if not conducted properly; careful technique and appropriately maintained equipment will avoid this.

5.3 Castration & Tail Docking

Castration and tail docking should be carried out as early as management practices allow, preferably before 10 weeks of age.

For lambs from 24hr to 10 weeks of age castration is permitted by R.R. (rubber Ring) or R.R./B (Rubber Ring + Burdizzo). The tail may be docked by R.R., R.R./B, R.R. + Cut with a sharp knife, or a gas hot iron. R.R. + Burdizzo or a gas hot iron is the recommended method.

For lambs from 10 weeks to 20 weeks castration must be carried out using R.R./B method. Tails can be removed by the R.R. + Cut method or a gas hot iron. With lambs of this age group the gas hot iron is the recommended method of tail docking and should become compulsory within two years of the introduction of this code.

Above 20 weeks of age these procedures may only be carried out with local anaesthetic by an operator who has undergone an effective veterinary training programme.

6. Euthanasia

6.1 Culling

All pre-planned slaughter of sheep must be carried out by shooting with a firearm or captive bolt pistol followed by throat cutting.

If throat cutting is not carried out in a mass cull situation then it is essential that a careful check is made to ensure that each animal is in fact dead. In any animal where there is any degree of uncertainty it should be shot again. Complete dilation of the pupils and the absence of regular breathing movements are useful indicators of death.

Slaughter of an individual animal in camp by throat cutting is permissible where a firearm is not readily available. The neck must not be broken.

6.2 Clubbing

Lambs (but not adults) may be stunned by a heavy blow to the back of the head to render them unconscious followed by bleeding out.