

# Docking Tails Too Short: A risk for our industry's image and our animals

By Bob Leder, DVM, Bear Creek, Wisconsin

Our sheep industry has more in common with the dairy industry than just milking dairy sheep. The U.S. dairy industry has been the subject of much criticism by animal advocates recently regarding the tail docking of milk cows. The goal of these groups is to influence policy, and improve the world as defined by their core beliefs. They're most successful when they connect their core beliefs to those of the consuming public that then erodes consumer confidence and product consumption.

Could animal advocate groups find fault with the sheep industry like they did with the dairy industry? If so, how would that unfold?

Tail docking of dairy cows became popular in the early 1990s. It was hypothesized that docked cows would be cleaner, which would then produce cleaner, higher quality milk. Studies by veterinarians and animal welfare scientists subsequent to its widespread adaption showed no improvement in milk quality or decreased mastitis incidence. Instead the researchers found cows with docked tails were more uncomfortable and showed more signs of distress than undocked cows when trying to avoid flies. The anti-tail docking efforts of animal advocate groups culminated in legislation banning the practice in California on January 1 2010. The efforts to ban tail docking continued on a state-by-state basis.

The National Milk Producer Federation (NMPF), founded in 1916, is a group that represents the interests of dairy farmers and the cooperatives they own. NMPF represents more

than 90% of the milk processed in the U.S. Given the increasing pressure to stop this practice, concerns regarding consumer fallout, and the lack of supporting scientific evidence of the practice of tail docking, NMPF called for the phasing out to the practice by 2022. This timeline was revised in October 2015 when NMPF voted to move the phase-out date up five years, to January 1, 2017. So how does all of this affect the sheep industry?

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**Longer docks at 2016 ag show in Essex, England.**



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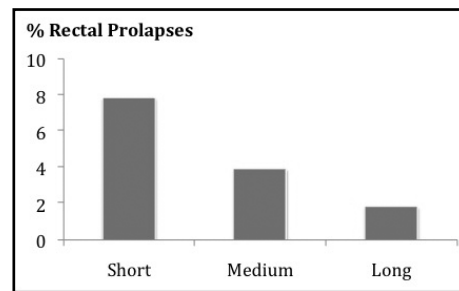
Docking newborn lambs' tails is a common, well-accepted management practice that likely began on wool sheep given that it effectively appears to reduce the risk of fly strike later in the animal's life. As with many other painful management procedures it is recommended to do earlier in life; it is still painful but younger animals recover faster.

In the past several decades, as 4-H, Future Farmers of America and other youth sheep projects have grown in popularity the length of the docked tail of show lambs has gotten shorter and shorter. The motivation for the extra short tail is to give the appearance of a more muscular rear end to the lamb resulting in tails now being docked as short as possible.

The casual observation expressed by some of the increased incidence of rectal prolapses in show lambs over that trend timeline has raised concerns that dock length may be a contributing factor to this painful and costly sheep health issue. So the question, "Does tail dock length have an impact on normal anus function and the act of defecation?" was raised by some in the industry.

To test this hypothesis, Dr. Dave Thomas

at the University of Wisconsin-Madison coordinated a study of over 1,200 lambs at five university flocks in the U.S. in 2000, with the results published in 2003. Lambs were randomly assigned to one of three dock lengths: 1 - short, as close to the body as possible; 2 - medium, in the middle of the caudal tail folds; and 3 - long, beyond the end of the caudal tail folds. The findings bring forward compelling evidence that the length of the docked tail significantly impacts the normal function of the anus and the act of defecation, and the welfare of the sheep (Fig 1).



**Fig 1. Effect of length of tail docking on incidence of rectal prolapses in sheep (n=1227) (redrawn from Thomas et al., 2003)**

The authors concluded: "Docking lambs at the site where the caudal folds on the underside of the tail attach to the tail significantly decreases the incidence of rectal prolapse to negligible levels. Ultra short docking is a cosmetic fad promoted in the show ring that compromises the health and well-being of sheep. The practice should be abandoned."

Subsequent to publishing the results of Dr. Thomas' study, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the National Lamb Feeders Association, the American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners, the National Institute for Animal Agriculture, and United States Animal Health Association all have drafted position statements or resolutions recommending lamb's tails "be docked at the level of the distal end of the caudal tail fold." In 2014 the AVMA completed a peer-review literature summary of the welfare implications of lamb tail docking, which included statically weighted (meta-analysis) review of previous and subsequent studies. Their position has remained unchanged.

Youth extension agents around the country drafted minimum tail dock length policies for lamb shows about the same time as Dr. Thomas' study was published. A tail dock-measuring device was developed to standardize a minimum dock length for show lambs. Unfortunately, these efforts have been resisted by the youth club lamb sector of our industry. Many purebred breeders continue to dock their sheep shorter than the distal end of the caudal tail folds. Most state 4-H programs have since abandoned enforcement of lamb dock length minimums due to adult resistance and now simply recommend longer lamb tail docking. West Virginia is the only state that I found that has continued an enforced minimum docked tail length policy. The net effect of these efforts was short lived and had minimal affect on the tail docking practices of the club lamb and purebred sectors of our industry.

In preparing this article, I found two state 4-H Extension websites (Cornell and NC) that had links to a 4-H handbook from Texas that describes the necessity to remove 1-4 vertebrae from lambs docked on range operations. This is not only contrary to best practices of tail docking, but requires the lamb to

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go through an unnecessary painful surgery. A Tennessee 4-H Extension service publication describes the rationale for short docked club/show lambs.

Equally disconcerting is the information provided by a frequently cited resource guide for 4-H youth sheep projects is the Sheep Resource Handbook for Market and Breeding Projects by the Ohio State University. That document recommends docking .75-1 inch from the body; a recommendation that is significantly shorter than distal to the caudal tail folds.

While the sheep industry associated with the show ring has rejected the science behind the rationale for longer tail docks, the commercial marketplace has not. The USDA term Short Dock is: "Used to describe a feeder or slaughter lamb that has been docked short (little to no tail remaining). These lambs typically sell at a discount." This descriptor is used in market reports across the U.S. ASI Sheep Care Guide recommends docking lambs distal to the caudal tail fold. Two large feedlot operators in Colorado told me that they see far more rectal prolapse problems in lambs that are short docked. Most lambs in their feedlot come from western range operations and those lambs' docked tails are about six inches long. Their solution to this problem is to sort out the affected lambs and send them to a nearby slaughter facility. Elsewhere in the world, regulations such as those in the United Kingdom requiring the docked tail length to cover the anus of males and vulva of females.

So the question has to be asked, "Why haven't longer tail docks been adopted by all of the U.S. sheep industry?" The market for club lambs, and to a lesser extent purebred show sheep, is disconnected from commercial markets. Buyer demand for show sheep is driven by show ring success. That success is determined by the preferences of the judges, who themselves are the breeders and producers for that segment of the industry. The prices paid to youth for lambs, especially the champions, at fair auctions are the incentive to have a lamb that conforms to the judges' preferences. Longer docked animals are not preferred in the show ring and hence have less value. So producers targeting this market dock ultra-short in an effort to maximize animal value with disregard to animal welfare and best management practices. The irony

### Short docks at 2016 sales in the United States.



though is that many of the non-winning lambs are then resold through commercial markets for considerably less.

Equally or even more disappointing is that many of the university flocks that participated in Dr. Thomas' study have not adopted longer tail dock standards. This fact has not gone unnoticed by the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI). AWI followed up on the university flocks in 2006 and found that they failed to adopt the recommendations arising from the Thomas study. The photos of university entries at the Center of the Nation sale in 2013 and 2016 indicate that docking practices at universities that entered sheep in that sale are much shorter than the distal end of

the caudal tail folds.

An equally troubling aspect of this situation is that the segments of our industry that short dock their lambs are the most publicly visible segments of our industry. Sheep and farming media expose the practice of short lamb tail docking all the time with articles about sheep/lamb shows and sales. Pictures abound of winning sheep docked shorter than the generally regarded best practice established by science and recommended by American Sheep Industry Association (ASI) and allied groups. There is sufficient evidence for animal advocate groups to make a case to the consuming public that the US sheep in-

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dustry disregards the best practices of lamb tail docking at the peril of animal's welfare.

So how do we get our house in order? First I'd suggest that university animal science departments compare their current lamb docking practices to recommended industry best practices and make sure they are in synchrony. One only has to look at what happened at the Meat Animal Research Center in Clay Center, Nebraska when the New York Times exposed animal welfare issues. "Walking the walk" instead of "talking the talk" by university flocks would be the best way to lead and educate producers. The youth and show segments of our industry can easily justify their practices by citing the practices of university flocks. Therefore, the first step is for university flocks to set the example. What better way for the industry to show its serious commitment to best practices and animal well being than by establishing minimum tail dock length standards for high profile sales such as the NSIP Center of the Nation Sale?

Dr. Dan Morrill, Iowa Sheep Extension Specialist, said: "The (sheep industry) Roadmap says production efficiency has been a priority for the sheep industry. That means we have to breed better, and we have to manage better" in a recent industry article. Wouldn't reducing the incidence a management induced malady come under the umbrella of "to manage better?" Lambs that develop rectal prolapses should be slaughtered

as soon as the prolapse occurs. The large feedlot operators in Colorado indicated that dealing with lambs with rectal prolapses and sorting them out is time consuming and inefficient. Death and premature slaughter of lambs decreases production efficiency.

Secondly, youth livestock extension faculty across the country need to review, edit and revise educational materials so they are consistent with industry tail docking best practices. Old, outdated material needs to be removed from circulation and the web. It is imperative that government (taxpayer) supported youth educational materials are in alignment with scientifically and industry supported best practices. Additionally, efforts must focus on the education of the sheep judges of state-sponsored shows of the best tail docking practices. Qualification standards for judges are highly variable between states, and often times very minimal. At the very least, judges should be made aware of the most recent best practice standards. Oregon's lamb dock policy includes the following: "Judges should be informed that we support the welfare of lambs and this recommendation (AVMA's distal to the caudal tail fold docking). Under no circumstances should comments be made such as "I could have moved this lamb higher in the class if it had a shorter dock."

Youth educational materials should include the latest information regarding the connection between dock length and rectal

prolapses, including the recommendation that affected lambs should be slaughtered as soon as possible when affected. While such a resolution of a youth project is an emotional and economic tragedy, it instills the high animal welfare ethic in the participant. As adults supervising youth projects, we need to remember that the focus is on the youth's character development, not the lamb. Doing procedures to correct a lamb's rectal prolapse are painful, short-lived and generally ineffective.

Lastly, I think it would be wise for sheep industry groups and universities to preemptively develop a media response should this practice and issue be targeted and more effectively exposed by animal advocate groups. Crafting talking points and training spokespersons would be wise.

As Susan Schoenian, the webmaster of the Maryland Small Ruminant page, wrote in 2008 "...extreme tail docking remains a blight on the purebred and club lamb sectors of the sheep industry." This remains today. If our industry elects to retain the practice of short tail docking we are indeed setting our selves up to burn the house down because we are playing with matches.

*Robert Leder, DVM, grew up on a dairy farm in North Central Wisconsin. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, College of Veterinary Medicine in 1982, and then completed a food animal internship at the University of Idaho's Caine Veterinary Teaching Center. Bob practiced veterinary medicine in Wisconsin since 1983, working primarily with dairy cows and farmers. He was a partner in a nine-doctor practice with offices in Bear Creek and Clintonville, WI; he retired from practice September 30, 2016. Bob has served on the WVMA executive board, and is now the President-elect. He served as the chair of the large animal welfare subcommittee while they drafted six guiding principles for the care of dairy cattle. He has given many presentations on proper care and handling of down cows to farmers, their employees and veterinarians in the Midwest. His wife Penny and he operate an 80-acre farm with 75 commercial ewes. Bob has served on the Wisconsin Scrapie Board, Wisconsin Sheep Breeder Co-op board, as well as the Governor's Grow Wisconsin Livestock Initiative Panel.*

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