

Animal Welfare Standards Public Consultation  
Locked Bag 3006  
DEAKIN WEST ACT 2600

6 May 2013

Dear Sir, Madam

**Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep - Public consultation**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above Standards and Guidelines and its accompanying Regulation Impact Statement (RIS).

Please find attached RSPCA Australia's submission which provides comment and states the RSPCA's position on a number of the proposed Standards and Guidelines.

It should be noted that the conversion of Model Codes to Standards and Guidelines should be seen by industry as an opportunity to improve practices across their membership. It is disappointing to see that, from an animal welfare perspective, the development process has not resulted in any significant improvement for sheep in this country.

Please don't hesitate to contact us should you require further information.

Yours sincerely



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# RSPCA Australia submission

## Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep Public Consultation

6 May 2013

This submission addresses the question put in the public consultation process about how the “draft sheep welfare standards will ensure the welfare of sheep” and whether the “associated consultation RIS demonstrates the need for the standards, and identifies the key costs and benefits for sheep producers, government and the wider community”.

### General comments

The lack of prescriptiveness of some Standards means that the intended outcome and the method of achieving that outcome are open to interpretation. Lack of prescriptiveness inevitably leads to lack of enforceability and RSPCA Australia seeks assurance that non-prescriptive Standards will be strengthened where this lack of enforceability could lead to poor animal welfare.

RSPCA Australia believes that greater improvement to the welfare of sheep in Australia could be achieved by adopting the more prescriptive and higher welfare guidelines into the Standards rather than reflecting current industry practice without significantly raising the bar.

### The Standards and Guidelines

#### Preface

The Preface states that the standards “are based on current scientific knowledge, recommended industry practice and community expectations.” For the standards to be based on community expectations, the level of animal welfare must be higher than the baseline proposed in the draft standards.

#### 1. Responsibilities

*S1.1 A person must take reasonable actions to ensure the welfare of sheep under their care.*

RSPCA Australia is concerned that this standard is open to interpretation and does not provide adequate assurance that the elements of responsibility (as detailed in G1.1) are adequately conveyed.

The standard needs to include the elements of responsibility listed under G1.1.

#### 2. Feed and water

*S2.1 A person in charge must ensure sheep have reasonable access to adequate and appropriate feed and water.*

RSPCA Australia is concerned that this standard is open to interpretation and does not provide adequate assurance that sheep are provided with sufficient feed and/or water to meet biological needs. It is unacceptable to allow sheep to starve to death or die of thirst, but it is equally unacceptable to allow sheep to reach a body condition score of 1 (i.e. skin over bone) or to deny them water at least daily.

The standard must require daily access to water.

#### 3. Risk management of extreme weather, natural disasters, disease, injury and predation

RSPCA Australia is concerned that this section of the Standards offers little protection for sheep seeking shade or shelter outside of extreme conditions. For example, it is clear from simple observation that

sheep will access shade when it is available. From the many expressions of concern we receive from members of the public, particularly during the summer, it is also clear that the general public believe that a paddock that provides shade is preferable over one that doesn't.

The section should include a standard that requires sheep to have access to shade/shelter.

#### 4. Facilities and equipment

*S4.1 A person in charge must take reasonable actions in the construction, maintenance and operation of facilities and equipment to ensure the welfare of sheep.*

RSPCA Australia is concerned that this standard is open to interpretation and does not provide assurance that the essential elements of an adequate facility as mentioned in G4.1 through G4.5 will be available.

The standard needs to include the elements of responsibility listed under G1.1 through G4.5.

#### 5. Handling and husbandry

*S5.1 (2) throw or drop, except to land and stand on its feet from a height less than one metre; or ...  
(4) drag sheep that are not standing by only one leg, ...*

RSPCA Australia is concerned that this standard conveys a message that it is acceptable to drag sheep or to throw or drop rather than place animals back on the ground.

The standard must not allow sheep to be dragged or dropped.

*S5.1 (3) strike in an unreasonable manner, punch or kick; ...*

RSPCA Australia is concerned that this standard is open to interpretation. Striking in an "unreasonable" manner will mean different things to different people, and the aim should be to convey the message that animals shouldn't be hit at all.

The standard must not allow sheep to be struck.

*S5.2 A person in charge of a dog that habitually bites sheep must muzzle the dog while working sheep.*

The presence of a dog is stressful to sheep as they are seen as a predator. The standard should specify that, where necessary, a basket muzzle be used to ensure the dog can breathe properly, pant while running and drink properly. The muzzle should only be used while the dog is working.

The standard must specify that a basket muzzle be used.

*S5.4 A person must consider the welfare of sheep when using an electric prodder, ...*

Electric prodders can cause pain and distress. RSPCA Australia advocates for the use of low-stress livestock handling be that on-farm, during transport or at slaughter.

The standard must not permit the use of electric prodders.

*S5.7 A person in charge must ensure that tethered sheep are able to exercise daily.*

RSPCA Australia believes that animals should only be tethered when there is no alternative means of confinement. It should only be carried out on a temporary basis and only for short periods of time. Tethered animals may become distressed if isolated from conspecifics for long periods. More humane methods of confining an animal to a specific area such as a secure yard or fenced paddock should be considered before tethering.

The standard must not permit permanent tethering or tethering for long periods.

*G5.16 Ear marking, tattooing, tagging and vaccination should be done in a way that minimises the risk of infection and with instruments that are sharp and clean.*

RSPCA Australia believes that mutilation of the ear, either through notching or cutting, is an unacceptable means of identification causing obvious pain and distress to the animal. Alternative, low-impact methods of identification should be investigated.

The guideline must remove reference to “ear marking” and a standard is required that does not permit ear marking.

## **6. Tail docking and castration**

*S6.2 A person must not tail dock sheep that are more than six months old without using pain relief and haemorrhage control.*

Tail docking is a painful procedure regardless of age; however, the standard only requires pain relief for animals over 6 months of age. RSPCA Australia believes that where invasive procedures are carried out, they should be conducted with pain relief. As a matter of urgency, industry should progress research to develop affordable and effective pain relief options that can be used on farm by competent operators. To expedite this, the standard should be written in a way that requires those carrying out painful procedures to use pain-relieving technologies by say the end 2015.. Given the timeframe for endorsement and implementation, this would provide an additional stimulus to bring to market new products that provide a viable alternative to conducting painful procedures without pain relief.

The standard must require pain relief for all animals regardless of age.

*S6.3 A person must leave a docked tail stump of a sheep with at least two palpable free joints remaining.*

The length of the tail is important, particularly for wool-producing sheep, where damage to the tail area as a result of severe docking means the animal is unable to direct faeces and urine outwards and becomes more susceptible to soiling of the wool in this area and, consequently, flystrike. The length of the tail should be such that it covers the bare area, thereby preventing sunburn and cancer.

The standard must require the tail to be long enough to cover the vulva in female lambs and be of similar length in males (G6.20 should be a standard).

*S6.4 A person must not castrate or use the cryptorchid method on sheep that are more than six months old without using pain relief and haemorrhage control.*

Castration is a painful procedure regardless of age; however, the standard only requires pain relief for animals over 6 months of age. RSPCA Australia believes that where invasive procedures are carried out, they should be conducted with pain relief. As a matter of urgency, industry should progress research to develop affordable and effective pain relief options that can be used on farm by competent operators. To expedite this, the standard should be written in a way that requires those carrying out painful procedures to use pain-relieving technologies by say the end 2015. Given the timeframe for endorsement and implementation, this would provide an additional stimulus to

bring to market new products that provide a viable alternative to conducting painful procedures without pain relief.

The standard must require pain relief for all animals regardless of age.

*G6.22 Lambs destined for slaughter before they are 12 weeks old, or before the onset of puberty, should not be castrated.*

Castration is a painful procedure and should only be undertaken where there is a clearly established need. Animals that are destined for slaughter prior to sexual maturity (i.e. when aggression may be a reason to castrate) should therefore not be castrated.

The guideline should be removed and a standard is required that ensures that animals destined for slaughter prior to the onset of puberty are not castrated.

## **7. Mulesing**

*S7.3 A person must not mules sheep that are 6-12 months old without using pain relief.*

Mulesing is a painful procedure and should not be carried out without pain relief regardless of the age of the animal. Pain relief is readily available.

The standard must ensure that, where mulesing is considered necessary, it must be carried out with pain relief.

*G7.6 Where mulesing is performed, lambs should be mulesed at 2-12 weeks of age.*

Mulesing is a painful procedure and regardless of pain relief application should be carried out at an early age as possible.

The guideline should be removed and a standard is required that ensures that, where mulesing is considered necessary, it is carried out on lambs between 2-12 weeks of age.

*G7.1 The options for breech strike prevention should be considered before undertaking mulesing including: ...*

RSPCA Australia believes that mulesing is an interim solution to the prevention and control of flystrike. The long-term solution is the breeding of flystrike-resistant sheep and producers should actively undertake alternative options to achieve this.

The guideline should be removed and a standard is required that ensures that the long-term solution to prevention and control of flystrike - i.e. breeding - is actively pursued.

*G7.8 Mulesing should be accompanied by pain relief where practical and cost-effective methods are available. Operators should seek advice on current pain minimisation strategies.*

Pain relief is readily available.

This guideline should be removed and a standard is required that ensures that, where mulesing is considered necessary, it must be carried out with pain relief.

## 8. Breeding management

*S8.2 A person must be a veterinarian, or operating under veterinary supervision, to perform surgical embryo transfer and laparoscopic insemination of sheep.*

These procedures may cause pain and distress and should be carried out with appropriate pain relief.

The standard must require that these procedures are carried using sedation, analgesia and aseptic technique (i.e. G8.14 should be a standard).

*G8.13 Semen collection using an artificial vagina should be used in preference to electro-ejaculation.*

Electro-ejaculation can cause pain and distress.

This guideline should be removed and a standard is required that ensures semen collection is carried out using an artificial vagina or other methods that do not involve electro-ejaculation.

## 9. Intensive sheep production systems

*S9.6 A person in charge must ensure sufficient space to allow all sheep to lie on their sternums at the same time in an intensive production system.*

Sheep should be provided with enough space to all lie down in lateral recumbency at the same time. This will ensure that animals are not crowded and, importantly, will allow them to rise from a lying position unencumbered.

The standard should be strengthened to ensure there is sufficient space for all sheep to lie in lateral recumbency.

*S9.7 A person in charge must ensure a sheep housed in a single pen for fine wool production is able to turn around, see, hear, smell and touch neighbouring sheep.*

RSPCA Australia does not support farming practices that cause suffering or distress to animals, or which restrict their movement or natural behaviour.

The standard must ensure that single penning of sheep is not permitted.

*G9.6 Sufficient fibre should be provided in the diet to promote rumination.*

Sheep in indoor systems should be provided with a diet that avoids digestive upsets and allows for rumination.

The guideline should be removed and a standard is required that ensures animals are provided with sufficient fibre in their diet to promote rumination.

## 10. Humane killing

*S10.5 A person killing a lamb by a blow to the forehead must ensure that the lamb weighs less than 10 kilograms.*

It should not be permitted to kill a farm animal by a blow to the head - the method requires considerable skill for it to be successful at the first attempt. The recent AVMA euthanasia guidelines state: "Manually applied blunt force trauma is also difficult if not impossible to apply consistently because of the degree of restraint required and complications in positioning calves, lambs, and kids for conducting this procedure."

The standard must require all sheep, including lambs less than 10 kilograms, to be killed using either a firearm or captive bolt.

*S10.6 A person must only use bleeding out by neck cut to kill a conscious sheep when there is no firearm, captive bolt or lethal injection reasonably available.*

It should not be permitted to kill a farm animal by cutting its throat while fully conscious as this results in pain, suffering and distress. Competent use of a firearm or captive bolt is the most humane way to kill an animal and firearms are required on-farm to kill animals over 24 hours old. Industry should actively promote the safe, effective and humane use of such firearms

The standard must require all sheep to be killed using either a firearm or captive bolt.

### **Regulation impact statement**

It is clear from the comments provided above that **RSPCA Australia supports option C** with all variations imposed except C6 and additional restrictions on C2. In other words, the Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines will only deliver a significant and meaningful improvement to sheep welfare in this country if the following requirements are included: all mulesing with pain relief; restrict mulesing age to less than 6 months; single pen for wool production not permitted; tethering not permitted; and, mandate pain relief for LAI and ET. We are aware that these options will incur a cost for sheep producers. Option C6 (require docked tails to have at least one free palpable joint) will result in increased risk of poor welfare and should not be supported. Option C2 (restrict mulesing age to less than 6 months of age) should further restrict the mulesing age.

We are pleased to note that page vi of the sheep RIS acknowledges that the **existing MCOP is inadequate**, and that the primary problem being addressed by the proposed standards and alternative options is overall risks to animal welfare. We would therefore be extremely disappointed if the financial cost analysis which dominates the document resulted in the implementation of options that are financially motivated at the expense of animal welfare.

Page 31 of the RIS makes an assumption that **welfare-related assurance schemes**, if they were to exist for sheep, would only appeal to a small percentage of consumers and would therefore be of limited benefit to producers. At present, the percentage of consumers seeking higher welfare animal products may be small but it is increasing. Retailer interest in this sector has never been higher and it is only a matter of time before the popularity of higher welfare eggs, chicken and pork is translated to sheepmeat and wool products. Sheepmeat producers on the front foot, in other words, those already working to higher welfare standards (i.e. higher than those proposed under Option B) will benefit greatly when this time comes. Indeed, when it comes to wool, it barely needs mentioning that the controversial practice of mulesing has resulted in a number of (overseas) retailers demanding wool from non-mulesed sheep.

RSPCA Australia is concerned that the comment on page 34 of the RIS which states that **Tri-Solfen** is only available through a veterinarian, gives the impression that the product is therefore difficult to obtain. This is not the case and the product is readily available. And, in the absence of other products that provide pain relief post mulesing, its uptake should be encouraged.

Page 44 of the RIS addresses the issue of **national consistency** in animal welfare arrangements. RSPCA Australia supports national consistency if the animal welfare outcomes are indeed meaningful and represent a genuine improvement in conditions for sheep across Australia. However, the development of Standards to date has not resulted in significant improvements other than, of course, the fact that Standards (in contrast to the MCOP arrangements) are enforceable. This means that RSPCA Australia will continue to support jurisdictions that choose to implement regulations that result in higher animal welfare outcomes than those intended by the Standards. As an animal welfare organisation, it is our aim to promote uptake of animal husbandry and management practices that are in the best interest of the animal concerned. Page 45 of the RIS provides examples of areas where jurisdictions have differing regulations than those proposed in this sheep Standard. RSPCA Australia will be most disappointed if these jurisdictions are effectively be required to lower their animal welfare standards simply for the sake of national consistency. Instead, the sheep Standards should aim for a similar, higher level of animal welfare.

Page 46, the RIS suggests that requiring **formal training and accreditation** of mulesing operators would impose an unnecessary regulatory burden. RSPCA Australia would suggest that formal training and accreditation would benefit the animal regardless of the procedure and that this should weigh heavier than any additional cost resulting from this requirement.

On page 60 of the RIS, the net benefit of a variation (C1) of standard 7.3 is discussed. However, standard 7.3 requiring **pain relief** post 6 months of age, is effectively meaningless as mulesing is routinely carried out well under 6 months of age. The same can be said for standards 6.2 (tail docking) and 6.4 (castration). The requirement for **pain relief** is limited to the relatively small number of animals that meet the conditions required while the vast majority would continue to be subjected to the procedure without pain relief - i.e. the *status quo* is maintained. This is not a good animal welfare outcome.

SUBMISSION ENDS