Dehorning of goats reduces the risk of injury to the animal, other goats and people. This guideline serves to assist veterinarians and producers with enhancing the welfare of their clients’ goats by providing guidance related to disbudding of goat kids.

METHOD
Cautery (hot iron) disbudding is recommended over surgical or other methods of dehorning. Caustic paste disbudding, use of clove oil, and band dehorning is not recommended due to increased pain and tissue damage. Cautery disbudding should only be performed by competent person(s) trained in the procedure. There is a risk of thermal and bacterial meningoencephalitis due to trauma to the skull.

ANALGESIA
Disbudding goat kids is a painful procedure, and as such, pain mitigation is recommended. Lidocaine alone has not been shown to reduce pain expression. Sedation or general anesthesia is preferred, but should be performed under the supervision of a veterinarian. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (meloxicam) have been shown to reduce signs of pain and are therefore recommended for use. In the U.S., use of lidocaine and NSAIDs such as meloxicam is extralabel in goats, so veterinary oversight is required.

Sheep dehorning is not recommended under any circumstance. Dehorning of sheep should only be performed by a veterinarian where the health and welfare of the animal is impacted (e.g. horn damage, or horn growing into head).

VETERINARIAN/CLIENT COMMUNICATION
Essential to this process is that consultation occur between the Veterinarian-of-Record (VOR) and the client regarding the age of disbudding, disbudding technique, pain mitigation strategy and legal drug use that are appropriate for each operation. The use of written, herd-specific protocols to document these discussions is encouraged. Such protocols should be reviewed on a regular basis.

AGE
It is recommended that goat kids are disbudded by 14 days of age, ideally between 5-7 days, but after a maternal bond has been established. Disbudding of goat kids over 14 days of age is not recommended. Dehorning after 14 days of age carries an increased risk that horn growth will still occur with scur formation and contributes to greater welfare concerns for the goat. Dehorning of goats over 14 days of age should be performed by a veterinarian and should only occur where health and welfare of the goat is impacted and not for cosmetic purposes.

Approved by the AASRP Board of Directors December 2020
RESOURCES

6. Hempstead MN, Lindquist TM, Shearer JK, Shearer LC, Sutherland MA, Plummer PJ. Acute cortisol and behavior of dairy goat kids administered local anesthesia, topical anesthesia or systemic analgesia prior to cautery disbudding. Physiol Behav. 2020;222:112942.