AASRP GUIDELINES

LAMB TAIL DOCKING

This guideline from the American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners serves to assist veterinarians with enhancing the welfare and productivity of their clients' lambs by providing guidance related to tail docking in sheep herds.

VETERINARIAN-CLIENT COMMUNICATION

Essential to this process is that consultation occur between the herd veterinarian and the client regarding age of tail docking, docking technique and pain mitigation strategies 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.

ACCEPTABLE REASONS FOR DOCKING TAILS

Docking tails in lambs has long been recognized as being useful in the prevention of fly strike caused by fecal soiling as well as improving cleanliness.[2, 3]

Ultrashort tail docking, defined as the docking of the tail proximal to the caudal tail fold, is associated with an increased incidence of rectal prolapse and non-healed dock sites.[1, 3, 10] Ultrashort tail docking can pose a risk to health and well-being of the lamb and has no medical benefit for the producer or the lamb.[6] Ultrashort tail docking of lambs should not be performed.[2]

METHODS

Different methods may be employed in the docking of lamb tails. The most appropriate method should be determined by the veterinarian based on the best interest of the health and well-being of the animal within the environment in which it is being raised. Rubber rings, docking irons, emasculators or emasculatomes (burdizzos) are acceptable methods for tail docking.[5, 8] Tail docking is done at the distal end of the caudal tail fold.[7]

Distal end of the caudal tail fold

AGE

Performing tail docking at the earliest age possible reduces stress associated with the procedure; after the first 24 hours of life[9] up to two weeks of age is ideal depending on the method used. Age of tail docking will vary between production systems and should be based on recommendations of the veterinarian of record in discussion with farm management. It is critical that producers work with their veterinarian to ensure appropriate procedures are in place to promote healing and minimize pain.

Age of tail docking also influences the method to be employed. Rubber rings are to be used only if docking the tail within the first seven days of life.[9] Docking irons, emasculatomes or emasculators may be employed from day one to two weeks of age. Lambs that have not been docked by two weeks of age should remain undocked. Surgical

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amputation under anesthesia with multimodal pain mitigation may be performed by a veterinarian only if medically necessary.

ANALGESIA

All methods of tail docking are painful. Use of a local anesthetic immediately prior to tail docking mitigates the immediate pain associated with the procedure and provides post-procedural analgesia.[5] Local blocks and epidurals can minimize pain associated with docking. The use of sedatives can make the administration of local anesthetics more practical and help reduce the perception of pain during the procedure. While some management systems may make administering local anesthetic difficult, veterinarians are encouraged to work with clients to advance its use. In addition to local anesthetics, consideration should be given to providing pain mitigation therapy during the recovery and healing period. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) should be used to effectively mitigate the post-procedural pain of tail docking.[5] The use of injectable and oral NSAIDS with or without the use of local anesthetics is acceptable for pain mitigation during the immediate post procedure period. NSAID use counters post-procedure pain, which promotes better short-term weight gain and feed intake. Further pain mitigation during the healing process should be considered where practical and is encouraged especially when the procedure is delayed beyond the first few days of life.

In the U.S., the use of lidocaine and NSAIDs such as meloxicam, is extralabel in sheep, so veterinary oversight is required.

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Approved by the AASRP Board of Directors October 2020

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