

## **4-H SHEEP PROJECT**

### **TAIL DOCKING LENGTH FOR YOUTH SHOWS**

Recently published data has demonstrated that when the tails of lambs are docked so close that there is no liftable, or even visible tail present there is a 10-fold increase in the possibility of rectal prolapse. To take proactive action to terminate this practice, the West Virginia 4-H Program and the West Virginia Association of Agricultural Educators Program Policy Committee of the FFA have adopted a tail-docking policy that will apply to all 4-H and FFA youth exhibitors in WV.

The policy applies to sheep born after January 1, 2002. If you are raising and/or selling lambs that will be shown by youth exhibitors in WV, you should follow these guidelines so that the lamb will not be disqualified.

The policy is attached along with 6 photographs showing the location of the “distal end of the caudal tail fold.” It is marked with white tape in 5 of the photographs and a board in the fourth photograph. This is the minimum acceptable docking length according to the policy.

## TAIL DOCKING LENGTH FOR YOUTH SHOWS

The ethical treatment of animals and the elimination of unethical practices in the show ring are important to our youth programs. The West Virginia 4-H Program and the West Virginia Association of Agricultural Educators Program Policy Committee of the FFA have discussed the practice of extreme or ultra-short docking of lambs' tails. This practice has been shown to contribute to an increased incidence of rectal prolapse, especially in lambs on finishing rations. After extensive study of the matter, we have adopted a policy. The policy stated for the youth sheep projects (both breeding sheep and market lambs) and for exhibition of animals by youth at fairs and shows in West Virginia is:

**“Lambs born after January 1, 2002 will be accepted for exhibition only if tails are not docked shorter than the level of the distal end of the caudal tail fold. Lambs that are properly docked will have a minimum tail length of .7 inches at show, measured by the approved measurement device, which will be placed against the base of the tail and pinbones.” It is strongly recommended that tails should be at least 1.4 inches in length at weaning.**

Extreme tail docking and other unethical show ring practices, and the ramifications to youth programs, were identified in a 2000 M.S. Thesis at WVU entitled “ Unethical Practices In Exhibiting Animals As Observed By West Virginia Extension Agents and High School Agriculture Teachers” by Jared Nestor. Evidence of the negative effect of extreme tail docking was presented by Dr. Keith Inskeep, WVU Professor Animal & Veterinary Sciences, from data collected in 2000 from five university experiment stations (Iowa, Ohio-Columbus, Ohio-Wooster, Texas, and Wisconsin). These studies, coordinated by Dr. David Thomas of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, involved several breeds and crosses, and significant differences were observed. Lambs docked at the terminus of the caudal tail fold, as recommended by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the US Animal Health Association (n = 216 at three of the stations), had only a 1.9% incidence of rectal prolapse. Lambs docked midway between that point and attachment of the tail to the body (n = 300 at three stations) had an incidence of prolapse of 4.7%. Lambs docked at the attachment of the tail to the body (n = 416 at five stations) had an incidence of 9.1%. Most of the lambs were finished on high-energy diets, typical of those for show ring lambs. In contrast, in one group of about 100 lambs finished on pasture, no prolapses were observed, regardless of tail length.

In an earlier study conducted by Harvey Windels and presented at the 1990 Minnesota Sheep and Lamb Feeders' Day, short (1/2 inch) vs long (3 inch) docks were compared in 3/4 Suffolk, 1/8 Finn, 1/8 Targhee lambs on a high-energy, completely-mixed diet. Over a two-year period, rectal prolapse was observed in 23/288 short-docked lambs (8%), compared to 1/288 long-docked lambs. Year-to-year differences were observed; in 1998, only 2 lambs prolapsed, but in 1989, 21 lambs prolapsed.

Sheep producers and youth show officials support a change in youth (4-H and FFA) project and show rules. As organizations that promote educational programming with life skills attainment, it is prudent to exemplify ethical treatment of animals and utilize quality management practices.







