

## Sheep health and welfare

Australian farmers take pride in caring for their animals and work around the clock to ensure they have feed, water and shelter and are protected from predators and disease.

Keeping sheep healthy is critical to the sustainability of the industry and every farm, and it is the right thing to do. Healthy, happy sheep are more productive and more profitable too.

Good animal welfare is supported by knowledge and skilled management through the prevention of disease and injury, veterinary treatment, appropriate shelter, nutrition, and recognised Australian industry best practice with regard to handling, transport, processing and euthanasia.

### **A national commitment to protecting animal welfare**

Australia has stringent animal welfare standards and guidelines, and it is protected by law in Australia. [The Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines](#) were created to harmonise and streamline livestock welfare legislation across Australia. The standards form the basis for developing and implementing consistent legislation and enforcement.

The standards include:

- ensuring livestock have access to adequate and appropriate feed and water
- ensuring prompt treatment for sick, injured or diseased livestock
- chapters on tail docking and castration; mulesing; and intensive sheep production
- ensuring dogs are under effective control when livestock are handled.

The entire supply chain for sheep production must comply with federal laws and regulations as well as those specific to the states and territories in which they operate.

### **Industry leadership**

As an industry, all stakeholders have a duty of care for the health and wellbeing of Australia's flock. This includes measurable improvements in sheep welfare across the supply chain, preparing plans for emergency disease outbreaks, meeting National Livestock Traceability Performance Standards, and reducing the cost of managing endemic diseases.

The industry has been proactive in creating programs and embedding frameworks to support industry commitments to best practice animal health and welfare. The [Sheep Sustainability Framework](#) developed under the leadership of Sheep Producers Australia and WoolProducers Australia has four components, one of which is 'Caring for our sheep'.

The Framework monitors and measures industry performance against a range of priorities each year, including animal care and handling and animal health, and helps to ensure Australia can demonstrate we are a global leader in sustainable sheep production.

## **Best practice on-farm**

Best practice sheep management supports the health and wellbeing of animals and ensures industry meets customer and community expectations regarding animal welfare. Key considerations include lamb survival, minimising stress during handling and transportation, reducing the impact of predators, providing pain mitigation during surgical procedures and ensuring all livestock get the right nutrition, especially when pregnant.

Vaccination is important and highly effective in protecting sheep from disease and improving farm productivity. The [National Producer Survey in 2022](#) reported that 97% of Australian producers' flocks received at least one type of vaccine.

Farmers also have a key role to play by keeping up to date with best practice advice and implementing good practice biosecurity measures on farm. This includes having a biosecurity plan for their property to prevent, detect and control the spread of any diseases, implementing a traceability system, and good record keeping.

Sheep producers that are accredited under the Livestock Production Assurance Program are required to demonstrate that they have on-farm systems that ensure livestock are managed in accordance with the requirements of the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines. This provides customers with evidence that animals have been ethically treated.

## **Reducing mulesing**

Flystrike is a serious risk to the health and welfare of Australian sheep leading to pain, distress and even death. It occurs when blowflies are attracted to urine and faeces near a sheep's tail and breech, and lay eggs where the skin has folds and wrinkles. Within 24 hours maggots hatch and feed off the sheep's flesh for up to three days.

Mulesing involves removing the skin around a lamb's breech and tail that is susceptible to contamination to prevent flystrike. Scientific publications show that without mulesing, the flystrike risk is 40-100%, compared to 1-3% with mulesing. While it is effective and has been common practice in the industry since the 1930s, Australian wool and sheep meat producers acknowledge the animal wellbeing issues involved. Therefore, phasing this practice out, whilst still effectively preventing flystrike, is a major goal of the industry.

Breech strike resistance is being incorporated into Merino breeding programs so that breeders and buyers of rams can select plainer bodied sheep that are more likely to be flystrike resistant, and mulesing is no longer required.

Additional measures include:

- Interim pain relief solutions – until alternative practices are implemented, pain relief solutions are available to reduce the pain associated with mulesing.
- Novel chemical approaches – researchers are developing a new type of chemical for blowfly control in response to the increasing incidence of insecticide resistance.
- Fly control options – research is also ongoing into the use of sterile insects and novel biological controls to determine their effect on the reduction of fly numbers. There is some initial research being undertaken to develop a flystrike vaccine as well.

## **Sheep Producers Australia's health and welfare advocacy work**

Sheep Producers Australia's advocacy work supports high standards of welfare and continuous improvement, to maintain market access and the industry's social licence.

We oversee the investment of industry levies in animal welfare research and extension programs with the aim of improving animal management, nutrition, health and welfare outcomes that are practical and effective for producers. This work provides tools and knowledge to help producers improve the wellbeing of the animals within their care and build community support for the sheep industry while increasing productivity too.

Sheep Producers Australia works with major industry bodies, including Animal Health Australia and all levels of government to both monitor and assist in controlling endemic disease and improve the overall health of the national flock.

Surveillance is key to meeting industry goals and Sheep Producers Australia is a major contributor to the National Sheep Health Monitoring Project (NSHMP), which gathers disease data from participating abattoirs and provides feedback through the Livestock Data Link. This system is rapidly improving the feedback producers are able to obtain regarding the health of animals sent for processing.

### **Other key issues Sheep Producers Australia is working on:**

#### ***1/ Best practice sheep reproduction***

Improving reproductive performance and weaning rates, and supporting ewe and lamb health, is a high priority for the sheep industry. Sheep Producers Australia is working with industry partners including Meat & Livestock Australia, Australian Wool Innovation, tertiary institutions and government bodies to address research, development and adoption gaps and support producers to implement best practice management solutions. Refer to the [Sheep Reproductive Strategic Partnership](#), which is supported by producer levies, for more information.

#### ***2/ Promoting pain relief***

'Lamb marking' refers to procedures such as tail docking, castration and mulesing.

Sheep Producers Australia supports mandating the use of pain relief for lamb marking in all states and territories through industry developed compliance programs and inclusion in The Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep.

Sheep Producers Australia and WoolProducers Australia co-developed the pain relief decision support for lamb marking tool published by Animal Health Australia, explaining the different pain relief modalities depending on whether the procedure creates an open wound, or not. Using suitable products to manage pain, relieve inflammation, reduce blood loss, disinfect, and protect wounds is regarded as best practice.

Sheep Producers Australia also successfully advocated on behalf of producers alongside industry allies to the Therapeutic Goods Administration to enable two painkillers - oral transmucosal meloxicam and injectable lidocaine - to be available to producers without veterinary prescription.

We are now working on a joint project with WoolProducers Australia to identify the barriers, needs and opportunities to support the adoption of best practice lamb marking procedures including increasing the level of on-farm analgesia and adopting the latest research and production tools.

### ***3/ Representing producers in the development of government welfare initiatives***

Sheep Producers Australia played an active role when the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep, and the Land Transport Standards and Guidelines, were developed.

We are now actively participating in the renewal of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy by Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to ensure Australia has national animal welfare system continues to be transparent, underpinned by science and evidence, driven by skilled management, responsive to community expectations and demonstrates our animal welfare credentials to the public in Australia and overseas.