

Mulesing accreditation – vital for wool's future

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ABSTRACT

Many sheep managers, wishing to carry out mulesing before 2010, may wonder why they should expend the time and expense of becoming accredited, as they will only continue to mules lambs until 2010 at the latest. The Australian wool industry has made commitments to our trading partners and to clothing retailers that mulesing operators will be accredited by the end of 2008 and will comply with new mulesing standards. It is likely that the markets will require some audited evidence that mulesing operators have been accredited as required. Failure to meet these targets may have significant negative effects on retailers already sensitised by adverse publicity on mulesing.

HISTORY

On 8 November 2004, the Australian wool industry announced its intention to phase out mulesing by 2010.

Primary Industries Ministerial Council (PIMC) requested the Animal Welfare Working Group to urgently review the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – The Sheep*, to incorporate new standards for mulesing ahead of the phase-out in 2010.

PIMC endorsed the new mulesing standards in an appendix to the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals - The Sheep*. These standards have been adopted in sheep animal welfare codes in all Australian states. PIMC also endorsed the principle of an industry accreditation program and dates for accreditation of mulesing operators.

The sheep industry has agreed to establish and implement minimum standards for the mulesing operation as one of several strategies to reassure clothing retailers that the Australian sheep industry is progressing towards the 2010 target. As part of this process, the sheep industry agreed to establish a program of mandatory accreditation for mulesing operators.

OBJECTIVE

The Australian Wool and Sheep Industry Taskforce and international retailers have signed a 'compact' to ensure best practice mulesing methods are implemented and maintained across Australia. This commitment includes the National Mulesing Accreditation Program (NMAP), an industry approved and operated program which maintains that all mulesing operators must become accredited.

Although surgical mulesing will be phased out by 2010, international concerns about welfare issues involved in surgical mulesing have highlighted the need for a mulesing accreditation scheme to be introduced before then. In light of these concerns, a National Mulesing Accreditation Program (NMAP) has been established, supported by Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI), to assure overseas woollen apparel retailers that animal welfare standards are being met.

EFFECT

The sheep industry is determined to find suitable and effective replacements for surgical mulesing by 2010 so that wool producers are able to protect their sheep without the use of the current mulesing technique. Significant industry funds are being employed to ensure that practical and cost effective replacements for surgical mulesing are available before the 2010 deadline.

The current technique of surgical mulesing has afforded valuable protection to Merino sheep against breech strike. The industry is providing regular updates to international retailers and industry stakeholders on progress towards the goal of an effective replacement to surgical mulesing. Two of these potential alternatives are showing promise. Many national and state industry representatives have firmly reiterated the commitment to phase out the current mulesing practice by 2010.

DESIRED OUTCOME

The NMAP program ensures the accreditation of mulesing contractors and woolgrowers who mules their own sheep. The process of accreditation will ensure that all mulesing operators employ consistent and effective mulesing practice including the use of appropriate pain control techniques

until the practice is phased out. For contractors and other mulesing operators to become fully accredited, they will need to undergo a knowledge assessment and "hands-on" skills assessment.

The process involves a one-day training and assessment course provided by the Kondinin Group and the Livestock Contractors Association (LCA). Anyone accredited by Kondinin Group through this course will automatically receive accreditation for NMAP. The offer to present this training was made to other providers but only Kondinin were able to meet the standards of the NMAP. Woolgrowers will need to demonstrate sufficient knowledge to ensure that any problems are corrected before the final assessment. Assessors will be accredited and highly experienced in surgical mulesing and will mainly be contractors.

As mulesing is to be phased out in 2010, the rationale for compulsory accreditation has been questioned. The main value of accreditation is to maintain the confidence and trust of the wool retailers that the program agreed to by the Australian Wool and Sheep Industry Taskforce is being implemented. Industry is currently investigating ways to demonstrate it has achieved the targets set by Government and industry. This may seem bureaucratic and impractical to the average mulesing operator. If it could be demonstrated that agreed improvements and alternatives to surgical mulesing were not being implemented at a local level this could reinvigorate the protest campaign and irrevocably damage the confidence of wool retailers. Notwithstanding this risk, there are significant benefits for operators who become accredited:

- The non-surgical mulesing techniques may only be available to accredited operators
- Use of pain management may only be available to accredited operators
- The program will improve skills in a number of areas especially in relation to shear preparation and sharpening.
- Those already operating at best practice will be formally recognised as having attained a high level of competency.
- Training and accreditation also covers other areas associated with lamb marking including tailing, castration, stock identification and vaccination. Improving skills in these areas is likely to lead to production and time saving benefits.

CONCLUSION

Accreditation of all mulesing operators and compliance with new mulesing standards throughout Australia by the end of 2008 will ensure that the guarantees given to valuable wool customers can be met and that mulesing will be performed to a high standard of effectiveness and welfare compliance.

KEY WORDS

Mulesing, accreditation, wool.

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