

Further information on sheep tail-docking regulations

Sheep tail-docking regulations came into effect on 9 May 2021, alongside others covering a variety of surgical procedures carried out on a range of animals. The general aim of these regulations is to clarify who can carry out surgical procedures and how they should be done.

Do I have to tail dock my sheep?

- Tail-docking can be done for cleanliness and to reduce the risk of fly strike. It is not mandatory.
- Tail-docking is a painful procedure and should only be done if there is significant risk of dagging and/or fly strike.
- Docking tails to the correct length can improve the health and welfare of sheep and lambs, as it prevents faecal matter accumulating on the tail and hindquarters of the animal.

Why is tail-docking being regulated, it's a pretty standard procedure?

- Although tail-docking, or tailing, is a common farming practice, it is a significant procedure for the lamb.
- Under the Animal Welfare Act 1999, a “*significant surgical procedure*” may only be carried out by a veterinarian or their supervised student, unless there are regulations that say otherwise. Tail docking is a significant surgical procedure but there are regulations in place to allow competent non-veterinarians to continue doing it and clarify how it should be done.
- The regulations generally reflect current practice, by allowing competent non-veterinarians (i.e., farmers, other sheep owners and tailing contractors) to continue to routinely perform sheep tail-docking. Using either a hot iron or rubber ring only and allowing only veterinarians to dock a sheep over 6 months old, also reflects current practice. The tail length requirement may mean a change in practice for some people and will improve animal welfare outcomes.

For more information on animal welfare regulations, visit: www.mpi.govt.nz/animalregs
A flyer summarising this regulation can be found [here](#).

What is the tail length requirement?

- The regulation says a sheep's tail can be docked “**no shorter than** the distal end of the caudal fold”. This is the point where the two folds of skin attach on the underside of the tail – see picture below:



*Thumb pointing out the
caudal folds*

For more images see here: [Reminder about docking/tailing rules | Beef + Lamb New Zealand \(beeflambnz.com\)](#)

- The end of the caudal fold is the shortest you can go before breaching the regulation. Note the wording is 'no shorter than', not 'must be docked at'.
- To be safe, leave some space between the end of the caudal fold and your docking mark.
- It is recommended that you should aim to keep enough tail to cover the vulva/anus.

Why this length?

- It aligns with what has been considered good practice for many years. Many people will have already been doing it this way. However, it will be a practice change for those who have previously docked very short or taken the entire tail off.
- The length requirement is derived from the code of welfare for painful husbandry procedures. It is in line with requirements in assurance or verification programmes such as the New Zealand Farm Assurance Programme and NZ Merino's ZQ Programme. It is also similar to requirements in other countries.
- It's important to balance the benefits of tail docking with the benefits of having a tail. Tails have an important function and are richly supplied with nerves and blood vessels. Docking according to these requirements ensures a medium length of tail is retained, which is good for the sheep.

Examples of ideal tail length



(Stock image)



Where is the science to back this up?

- Tails docked to the appropriate length deter insects from the rear of an animal and minimise the risk of fly strike. Research has shown the risk of fly strike is increased by having a tail either too long or too short.
- Tails help prevent dagging by allowing the sheep to flick faecal matter away.
- Tails provide a muscle anchor, which helps regulate proper rectum function and pelvic floor integrity. Tails docked too short may increase the risk of prolapse.
- Research has also shown that the shorter a tail is docked, the more painful it is for the animal. Any husbandry procedures need to be performed with the least pain possible.

What can I use to tail-dock my sheep?

- For sheep under 6 months old, you must only use a hot iron or rubber ring.
- For sheep over 6 months old, tail-docking must only be done by a veterinarian, using pain relief.

Can I ring the tail and then cut it off with a knife?

- No. Cutting the tail with a cold knife (surgically removing) is generally considered to be the most painful method of tail-docking.

What if I have ringed the tail and it takes too long to fall off - can I use a knife then?

- You must first check if the end of the tail is dead and make sure only dead tissue is removed. Do not cut through live tissue.
- If there is still a lot of living tissue left, seek advice from your veterinarian.

What about the new clip technology?

- For sheep under 6 months old, you must only use a hot iron or rubber ring. Clip products are not able to be used.
- Clips could be used for castration of sheep. The requirements for castration can be found [here](#).

Who is liable?

- The regulation applies to the tail docker, the owner and every person in charge of the sheep at the time of docking.
- The tail docker and owner and every person in charge may be liable if a sheep's tail is docked shorter than the distal end of the caudal fold.
- If you use a tail-docking contractor make sure they are aware of the rules. Have a chat about length as part of your tail-docking planning.
- If a sheep under 6 months is tail-docked by a method other than hot iron or rubber ring, an infringement fee (fine) may be issued of \$500 per animal.



- If a sheep's tail is docked shorter than the distal end of the caudal fold, an infringement fee (fine) may be issued of \$500 per animal.
- If offending is more serious (e.g. repetitive or applies to multiple sheep) MPI can file a charging document with the Courts and seek a penalty of up to \$7,500 for a body corporate.

Check the MPI website for further information on regulation penalties and what to do if you receive an infringement notice: www.mpi.govt.nz/animalregs

What about tail-docking contractors?

- The regulation applies to the tail docker, the owner and every person in charge of the sheep at the time of docking.
- If you use a tail-docking contractor make sure they are aware of the rules. Have a chat about length as part of your tail-docking planning.

I run a docking/tailing gang or am part of one, how can I prove that I have followed the rules?

- The best way to protect yourself is to make sure you and your staff know how to dock correctly.
- It would be useful for your tailing gang to have records of any training undertaken or information given to staff.
- Keep simple records of jobs including date, location, who was there, how many lambs docked, expectations set and when checks are made on staff performance throughout the day.
- Have a chat to the farmer about length as part of your tail-docking planning.

What if I receive/buy in sheep that have tails that are too short?

- The regulation applies to the tail docker, the owner and every person in charge of the sheep at the time of docking.
- It does not apply to a person who buys in sheep with tails already docked too short. However, we'd suggest keeping records such as photos, invoices, date of purchase.
- MPI encourages all those along the supply chain to be familiar with the rules and communicate these to their clients or breeders.



I am a stock agent/trader/purchaser, what are my responsibilities?

- Again, the regulation applies to the tail docker, the owner and every person in charge of the sheep at the time of docking.
- It does not apply to a person who buys/trades sheep with tails already docked too short. However, we'd suggest keeping records such as photos, invoices, date of purchase.
- MPI encourages all those along the supply chain to be familiar with the rules and ensure awareness for their clients.

What compliance approach is MPI taking?

- MPI is confident that farmers and other sheep owners care about their livestock and want to ensure their health and welfare.
- If someone is found to be tail-docking in breach of the regulations, MPI will take what is considered an appropriate compliance action, given the circumstances. This could include education, warnings, or infringement notices. Prosecution would be considered for more serious or repeat offending.

What are the requirements for pain relief?

- Currently, it is recommended best practice that pain relief should be used if it is economically and practically viable to do so. More detail around this can be found [here](#).
- For sheep over 6 months old, tail-docking must only be done by a veterinarian, using pain relief.
- Some industry assurance programmes will require pain relief for tail-docking as part of their supplier requirements in future.
- If you are interested in providing pain relief for tail-docking consult your veterinarian about available options.