Mulesing and tailstripping: for the prevention of fly-strike

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Mulesing and Tailstripping . . .

for the prevention

By W. L. McGARRY, Officer in Charge,
Sheep and Wool Section

MULESING and tailstripping are basic to fly strike control. During emergencies and bad fly waves they may need to be supplemented by temporary protective measures such as jetting and crutching.

When carried out efficiently, these treatments, with correct tail length, confer life-long and permanent protection, and reduce crutch strike to negligible proportions. Crutch strike causes most of the costly loss due to fly strike.

HOW STRIKE OCCURS

In Western Australia damaging blowfly strike occurs mainly in the moist crutch area. The odours arising from this area attract flies, and encourage strike.

Whether from rain, urine, or sweat, constant moisture causes an irritation and scalding of the skin. The skin becomes inflamed and an exudate from the inflamed area adds to the moisture present and gives off the odours that attract the blowfly.

Moisture and heat are essential for fly strike, and basic control, therefore, must aim at drying up the crutch area of the sheep. This is precisely what mulesing and correct tail length do to the crutch of the sheep.

The result of the mules operation, pictured a month after being properly carried out at marking time (left) compared with an untreated lamb of the same age. Treatment stretched the bare area to about four inches in diameter.
TAIL LENGTH

The prevention of crutch strike commences at lamb-marking time.
Irrespective of whether or not you mules at this stage, tails in ewes should be cut at a length which when healed, allows the stump to just cover the tip of the vulva, and the equivalent length in wethers. This is known as the medium length tail.

Tails cut in this way can brush across the vulva tending to dry the area after the ewe has urinated. The medium length tail also tends to part the wool on both sides of the vulva, giving a better channel for the urine and so less moisture in the crutch. There is ample evidence that the sheep with the medium length tail is least likely to be struck.

In cutting the tail, place the knife edge about half an inch above where the cut will be made. Push loose skin down to the correct level, fold the tail over the knife as illustrated and make the cut. In this way, a flap of loose bare skin is left to heal over the stub of the tail. This bare end assists in keeping the tail clean and dry because there is little wool left to collect moisture and dung.

Knife held for cutting the tail to the correct length. The back of the knife is placed just below the vulva and the tail is bent back on to the edge. In this picture the knife has been brought forward in the act of cutting
MULESING

The treatment consists of the removal of two crescent shaped pieces or strips of skin, one each side of the vulva. With healing, the cut edges of skin on either side of the vulva come together, stretching out and considerably enlarging the bare skin area in the process.

The cuts should start just below and to the side of the butt of the tail and skirting, but not cutting into the bare skin around the vulva. They are finished by tapering off to a point, just above the hamstring. The widest part of the cut should be opposite the vulva.

It is emphasized that to obtain maximum stretching and the full benefit, the treatment must be drastic. Take off as much skin as possible.

The effect of the mules treatment when healed is to extend or enlarge the bare skin area surrounding the vulva and so reduce the woolly area in the crutch that holds moisture. By reducing moisture and keeping the crutch drier and cleaner, mulesing makes the area much less attractive to the fly and the sheep much less susceptible to crutch strike.

Summed up, mulesing deprives the flies of their favourite breeding ground—the moist crutch of the living sheep—resulting in much less strike and fewer flies to initiate further strikes.

INCORRECT—Inexperienced operators have a tendency to start the cut with the blades held at the wrong angle (diagram I) with the result that, as the cut is made, it runs away more or less in a straight line (diagrams II and III).

The main reason for this wrong result is that the operator remains standing directly behind the sheep. At the start of the cut the operator should stand behind and to the side of the sheep, gradually moving across as the cut continues to completion.

CORRECT—Diagram IV shows the direction in which the points of the blades should face when the cut starts (diagram IV, A to D). The gradual turn away to finish off the cut is shown on diagram V, B to C. The completed cut, correctly performed, is shown in diagram VI.
The dotted lines show the direction of the cuts. They follow the bare area to a point below it then turn outwards to finish inside the leg.

Below left: Satisfactory stretching and enlargement of the bare area around the vulva, one month after the mules operation.

Below right: The result of incorrect treatment in which the cuts were made too far from the bare area. There is little stretching and the bare area is triangular and narrow instead of broad and square.
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TAILSTRIPPING

Tailstripping done in conjunction with mulesing gives added protection against crutch and tail strike. Tailstripping consists of the removal or “stripping off” the wool bearing skin on the top of the tail. Do not cut away any skin on the bare under surface of the tail. The principle is similar to mulesing in that during healing, the bare skin under the tail is drawn around the tail, leaving a bare or wool-less tail that does not soil and attract flies.

WHEN TO TREAT

Sheep of any age can be mulesed and tailstripped without harmful effects. The earlier they are treated (as lambs or weaners) the longer will be the protection.
Construction details of a bar crush for mulesing and tailstripping

over the life of the sheep. In addition, the young ewes in a flock being more susceptible to strike, need the protection of mulesing more urgently than the older ewes.

Treatment should be carried out when flies are least active, that is when it is too hot and dry or too cold for much fly activity.

It is strongly recommended that mulesing and tailstripping become routine practice in all flocks in the same way as other accepted management practices, such as marking, crutching, and drenching.

If this is done, in a few years the whole flock will have been treated and permanently protected from the ravages of the fly.

This can be done by treating the lambs at marking or as weaners at crutching, or off shears—whichever fits in best with management and fly activity.

EQUIPMENT

Mulesing and tailstripping should not be carried out in old sheep yards. Small temporary yards erected in paddocks are recommended.

The treatment should be carried out with the sheep held in a crush or cradle fixed to a raised ramp or platform. Elevation of sheep saves lifting and average truck height is suitable.

For small flocks, the truck can be loaded, driven to the paddock, and the
sheep treated from the truck and dropped onto clean ground, avoiding the necessity for post-mulesing droving.

The wounds heal quickly. As soon as sheep are treated, they should have immediate access to the paddock in which they are to run. They should remain undisturbed and not handled for three to four weeks, to facilitate healing.

When mulesing at lamb-marking, a suitable elevated cradle is essential to restrain the lambs and keep them in the correct position for efficient and quick treatment.

Each operator should have two pairs of shears which when not in use should be kept in a container of antiseptic. Sharp shears make mulesing easy and a light to medium texture oilstone is needed to “touch up” and keep the shears sharp during mulesing.

Mulesing shears ground and off-set sharpened ready for use, together with mulesing marking cradles as illustrated, are available from local distributors.

**IN BRIEF**

1. Crutch strike in sheep can be prevented.

2. Mulesing, tailstripping, and correct tail length is basic fly control—they should be part of every Merino flock owner’s management.
(3) Woolgrowers have nothing to lose and a lot to gain by treating their young sheep as part of yearly routine practice.

(4) Mulesing and tailstripping requires no special skill and with practice can be done efficiently by any station or farm hand.

(5) It is essential that practical instruction in the correct technique be first obtained from an experienced muleser.

(6) Contact the Sheep and Wool Section, Department of Agriculture, South Perth, or your local Adviser for practical instruction and demonstration in Mulesing and tailstripping.
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