



# Monitoring castration and tail docking of lambs

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## What were we trying to find out?

Our aim was to establish whether data are currently collected by industry bodies operating within the Scottish lamb sector on (a) the use of castration and tail docking and (b) the methods employed to perform these procedures. If such data are collected, they may offer a way for Scottish Government to benchmark current practices and to monitor future trends.

## What did we do?

We interviewed representatives from across the lamb supply chain in Scotland. We explored with each stakeholder two themes: (a) whether data are collected routinely or on occasion on the number of lambs castrated or tail docked; (b) if so, whether the data collected allow the method of castration or tail docking to be determined. Additionally, with a selection of stakeholders where additional data collection would seem most feasible, we asked what level of resourcing would be required to achieve this. The interviewed stakeholders represented the following components of the supply chain (see also further detail in the appendix): farm assurance, agricultural consultancy, veterinary practice and flock health planning, markets, livestock buyers, processing, abattoir inspection, retail. Additionally, Food Standards Scotland obtained views from Official Veterinarians covering 10 additional abattoirs.

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## What did we learn?

### **Existence of routinely collected data**

Currently none of the stakeholder organisations routinely collect and store data on the use of castration or tail docking, except for one large abattoir out of the 13 which provided evidence either directly or via Official Veterinarian feedback to Food Standards Scotland. This abattoir collects data on tail docking in the lairage but not on castration.

Quality Meat Scotland on-farm inspections performed by Food Integrity Assurance (FIA) ask farmers whether castration is performed and by what method. Quality Meat Scotland does not believe that responses to these questions are stored. No comparable questions are asked regarding tail docking. A flock health planning stakeholder indicated that information on tail docking and castration practices will be collected in the future in their health planning system but is not currently available.

Some retailers collect data on use of castration and tail docking from a small minority of farmers who are members of specialist producer groups. These farmers are almost exclusively in England and Wales. One retailer commented that the data captured includes the method used and use of pain relief.

One stakeholder collates data on tail length on behalf of retailers. The data are collected by abattoir Animal Welfare Officers and scored as undocked, docked at a normal length or docked too short. Little, if any, of these data are collected in Scotland. No comparable data are collected on castration.

Both consultancy stakeholders interviewed noted that breed-specific variation in tail length would make it difficult by inspection at an abattoir to determine if tail docking had been performed. One retailer stakeholder disagreed with this view.

One veterinary stakeholder and one consultancy stakeholder commented that the sale of anaesthetic and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs may provide a crude indication of uptake of pain relief for castration and/or tail docking, but that these medications would be used for other procedures and conditions also. Abstracting this information from practice databases was considered to be challenging but not impossible.

### **Retrospective determination of method of castration and tail docking**

The majority of the Official Veterinarians covering 10 abattoir stakeholder premises approached by Food Standards Scotland on our behalf felt that it would not be

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possible to determine the method of castration or tail docking with the current level of knowledge of lesion appearance. This agrees with the views of the Food Standards Scotland staff and one retailer stakeholder. Other stakeholders did not express a view on this issue.

### **Scope to include capture of new data by stakeholders**

One stakeholder suggested that disclosure of the use of castration and tail docking could be added as a mandatory requirement to the Food Chain Information documentation provided by producers when presenting animals for slaughter.

Two of the three abattoir stakeholders that we interviewed directly indicated that collection of data at slaughter would impose a significant additional burden on their business. The third noted that collection of data in the lairage could be integrated into existing inspections and would require only modest additional effort. Views provided to Food Standards Scotland from Official Veterinarians in 10 additional abattoirs indicated that the majority believed that the collection of data would require additional staffing. Inspection by Food Standards Scotland staff was also deemed to be feasible if adequately resourced.

Sale of castration and tail docking equipment was recommended as a way to track uptake of alternatives to use of the rubber ring method. However, it was noted that equipment may be purchased and used over several years, or only used intermittently, so may be a very blunt tool for assessing practice.

Inclusion of castration and tail-docking practices in flock health planning software and QMS inspections might be feasible although it was noted that these data are not publicly available at present.

## **What do we recommend?**

Robust baseline data are required on current practices with which to monitor future changes regarding castration and tail docking. Ideally these data should be collected by independent actors inspecting live animals or carcasses. The amount of resourcing required to achieve this at various points in the supply chain could be explored.

It may prove difficult to ascertain the method of castration/tail docking without collating information from producers. Amendment of the Food Chain Information proforma to capture the required data would be a more efficient approach than

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separately surveying producers. Alternatively, around 92% of prime lambs and hogs sold in Scotland in finished auction sales are assured by Quality Meat Scotland. With this large coverage of the Scottish lamb sector, we recommend exploring the potential for data to be captured and stored on the use and method of castration and tail docking during on-farm Food Integrity Assurance inspections performed for Quality Meat Scotland.

## Appendix: Stakeholder organisations interviewed

### **Farm assurance**

Quality Meat Scotland

### **Agricultural Consultants**

SAC Consulting

Forrit Consultancy

### **Veterinary practices**

University of Edinburgh Farm Animal Practice

Clyde Veterinary Group

Sheep and Suckler Cow Animal Health Planning (SAHPS)

### **Markets**

United Auctions

### **Livestock buyers/marketing group**

Farm Stock (Scotland) Ltd.

### **Processors**

ABP Food Group

Dunbia Highland Meats

One further processor who requested to remain anonymous

### **Abattoir inspection**

Food Standards Scotland.

Additionally, Food Standards Scotland obtained feedback from Official Veterinarians on practices operating within 10 Scottish abattoirs as part of our consultation. These 10 were additional to those interviewed directly and listed under 'Processors' above.

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**Retail**

Foods Connected

Waitrose

Sainsbury's

One further retailer who requested to remain anonymous