

11



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Wool Sheep Welfare

Humankind has been weaving and wearing wool since 10,000 BCE. There are more than 1000 breeds of sheep in the world. During 2017, 1.1 billion sheep produced just over 2 million tons of raw wool for clothing and other textiles.

Wool sheep welfare is at the heart of the global wool industry and every wool grower's farm.

Around the world, wool growers apply the best available animal husbandry practices to ensure the health of their flocks.

The industry recognises the importance of this issue to consumers, brands and retailers, and is committed to transparency in all stages of the wool pipeline.

Best Practices for Wool Sheep

According to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), animal welfare standards should be based on sound scientific findings, and optimal animal health should always be the basis of animal welfare.

The Five Freedoms

The OIE is the global authority for standards on animal welfare¹, and its "Five Freedoms" for the care of animals are recognised internationally². The IWTO and OIE maintain a Memorandum of Understanding and work together to ensure that the highest standards of animal welfare and biosecurity are met.

1. Freedom from hunger, malnutrition and thirst
2. Freedom from fear and distress
3. Freedom from physical and thermal discomfort
4. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
5. Freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour

An animal experiences good welfare if the animal is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, is not suffering from pain, fear and distress, and is able to express behaviours that are important for its physical and mental state.

Good animal welfare requires disease prevention and appropriate veterinary care, shelter, management and nutrition, a stimulating and safe environment, humane handling and humane slaughter or killing.

Read more about each principle and how it applies in practice in wool production: view or download the IWTO Specifications for Wool Sheep Welfare, available at www.iwto.org/work/wool-sheep-welfare.

IWTO's Specifications for Wool Sheep Welfare

Based on the universally recognised Five Freedoms of animal welfare embodied in the OIE's Terrestrial Animal Health Code², the IWTO Specifications provide a concise guide to best practice principles for wool sheep production around the world.

The Specifications respect the vast diversity of sheep production environments – which vary from extensive rangelands to intensively housed systems; additionally, the document describes the legislative frameworks that protect animal welfare in each wool producing country.

Each major wool producing country – Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, United States, and Uruguay – has a set of animal welfare laws which wool growers are bound to uphold, and a corresponding set of best practice regulations to guide animal husbandry practices. These animal husbandry management tools are highly specific to production system, environment, and sheep breed.

Cruelty to animals in the major wool-producing countries of the world is a very serious crime. Tolerance in the wool trade of anyone suspected of abuse is, and always will be, zero.

A Word About Mulesing

• What is it?

Mulesing is a procedure developed to prevent sheep from suffering flystrike, an infestation of a sheep's flesh by the maggots of a blowfly (*Lucilla cuprina*).

The fly is attracted to the breech area of the sheep by urine and faeces. It lays its eggs in the wool and when the eggs hatch, the maggots bury into the skin.

Mulesing is a surgical process that involves cutting skin from around the breech area of the sheep so that the fly cannot lay its eggs.

No farmer who muleses does so callously or casually, as some animal activists claim. If there was an effective alternative, it would be adopted. The procedure is done to prevent disease, suffering and death.

When sheep are at risk of flystrike, it would be irresponsible not to attempt to prevent it. Many producers choose to use an anaesthetic pain relief if they must perform the procedure.

• Traceability

The mulesing status of a wool bale can be found on IWTO Test Certificates. See IWTO Fact Sheet 09, Traceability Through Wool Certificates, on www.iwto.org

About IWTO



With a world-wide membership encompassing the wool pipeline from sheep to shop, the International Wool Textile Organisation represents the interests of the global wool trade. By facilitating research and development and maintaining textile industry standards, IWTO ensures a sustainable future for wool. To learn more about IWTO and its activities, visit www.iwto.org.

¹OIE World Organisation for Animal Health – International Standards <http://www.oie.int/en/standard-setting/overview/> (accessed 27/11/2018)

²OIE World Organisation for Animal Health Terrestrial Health Code Section 7 Animal Welfare http://www.oie.int/index.php?id=169&L=0&htmfile=titre_1.7.htm (accessed 27/11/2018)