

## **ASSISTING INDUSTRY TO RESPOND TO ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES**

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There is an increasing focus on animal welfare globally at both government and industry levels. Retailers and food chains, such as McDonalds, are seeking evidence that their suppliers are adhering to welfare-friendly standards (Bayvel 2004). In Australia, the pig and poultry sectors have been examining the implications of standard industry practices in relation to animal welfare for many years. Barnett *et al.* (2000) describes an audit system that has assisted poultry producers to identify key welfare areas for assessment.

In relation to the sheep sector, an extensive consultative process involving industry, welfare groups and scientists, undertaken by the Animal Welfare Centre based at Werribee, Victoria, identified mulesing as 1 of 5 extremely important welfare issues (Cronin *et al.* 2002). Others have urged the industry to reduce reliance on surgical mulesing particularly by evaluating the potential of a long-term solution through genetic improvement (Karlsson *et al.* 2001).

The sheep industry has invested substantial funding over the past 30 years in developing alternatives to mulesing, with current research in a depilatory technique showing some promise. However, a commercial product may not be available for producers for several years. In the meantime, efforts to expand an accreditation program for mulesing contractors, developed by the Livestock Contractor's Association (LCA) in NSW, to a national level through an Australian Wool Industry funded project, are underway. The accreditation program, which is underpinned by a set of guidelines, will demonstrate to the wider community a commitment by industry to improve welfare standards. The key strategies to achieve a national accreditation program include;

- Conducting a current situation analysis for each state in relation to mulesing,
- Adapting the LCA mulesing guidelines and accreditation program to become a national program,
- Developing a support network of key people and organisations in each state, and
- Developing an implementation plan for each state.

In addition to contractor accreditation, farmer awareness and training days will also be offered, as well as information provided to agricultural colleges. The current draft national guidelines include cradle design, hygiene, equipment maintenance (especially sharpness of shears), tail length, amount of skin removed, and use of flystrike preventatives. It is envisaged that states will have the option to modify the guidelines to accommodate specific needs, similar to the livestock welfare codes of practice.

The LCA has recognised a significant need, which in most states had been addressed by state agricultural agencies through mulesing instruction days and published materials until the 1970s. However, since that time information and practical training has not been available to the industry. The national guidelines and accreditation program, which will be offered by the LCA with anticipated support from government and industry, will help improve welfare standards as an interim measure until an alternative to surgical mulesing is available.

Addressing animal welfare issues is often complex and difficult, however, valuable initiatives already undertaken by some industry sectors should be recognised and supported.

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