

# Sheep Mulesing and Animal Lib

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The practice of mulesing sheep to prevent blowfly strike has recently come under fire from the Animal Liberation movement in Australia. Although it is only one of the many issues which Animal Lib has raised in its campaign to reform various sectors of the livestock industry, it is particularly illustrative of the kinds of conflicts in world view which arise when animal rights activists turn the spotlight on the farming establishment. Spokesmen for the livestock industries are quick to stress the emotional and sometimes sensational portrayal by Animal Libbers of time-honored animal management practices, as well as the sinister role of the urban press. Animal Libbers, on the other hand, profess a desire to reach a reasonable compromise with the farming community while at the same time proposing legislation which could have serious economic repercussions for the farmer and the consumer. Both sides offer valid arguments, but the debate is often frustrated by a mutual lack of sensitivity and an incomplete understanding of the context in which the other group is operating. Issues which combine economics, social attitudes, ethics and politics are seldom, if ever, clear-cut. Sheep mulesing as it is presently practiced constitutes an animal welfare problem, but it is a problem which is tightly interwoven with the sturdy threads of rural tradition and economic benefit.

## *Why is Mulesing Practiced?*

Mulesing is an operation in which sections of skin as wide as 164 mm and as deep as 94 mm are cut from the buttocks and tail of unanesthetized lambs, usually at marking (2 - 10 weeks) or weaning (4 - 5 months). These areas are stripped to avoid fly and maggot infestation (breecstrike) which can occur in the moist, wool-covered skin folds of the sheep.

John Newman, President of the Sheepmeats Council in Australia, stated in *National Farmer* (November 29, 1979) that mulesing "if well-done is a rapid operation, but [it] inflicts pain. But it protects sheep from blowfly strike, which is very painful." Translated into the language of animal welfare, this statement argues that greater cruelty attaches to leaving sheep unprotected from breecstrike then to subjecting them to a painful but relatively short-lived preventive procedure. If this were the whole story, there would probably not be much resistance to Animal Lib's call for a safe and humane alternative to mulesing. However, as stated by the New South Wales Department of Agriculture (*Agr Gazette* 83:146-147, 1972), mulesing offers additional economic advantages, such as less stained wool and easier mating, lambing and crutching, which can hardly be overlooked in a nation whose live sheep industry yields in the area of \$100 million per year. One begins to see why it is no simple task to gather the resources to develop an alternative and then attempt to introduce it into a farming community which views

mulesing as economically sound and ethically defensible. This situation certainly does not mean that the possibility of reform should be dismissed, but it does demonstrate the need for impartial research into the development of other methods which would eliminate or reduce the animals' pain and satisfy the economic requirements of the producer. One way to start is to look at circumstances in another part of the world where sheep are raised without mulesing.

In the southwestern United States, blowfly strike is not as serious a problem as in Australia, but it is still a source of concern to wool growers. When blowflies do strike, an untreated animal usually dies within a short time. Treatment in both the United States and Australia consists of shearing the infested area and applying any of a wide range of insecticides. However, in contrast to mulesing, which is a one-time procedure with permanent results, preventive measures in the US are confined to crutching (annual shearing of the vaginal area) and shearing in the spring, before the wet season. Dr. Maurice Shelton (Texas A&M University) stated that in addition to these routine measures, a stockman might jet spray his sheep with an insecticide if they habitually walk through tall and dewy grass.

It would thus seem that less radical husbandry practices could serve the same purpose as mulesing. Still, Australia represents a special case. The species of blowfly there is resistant to most organophosphate insecticides. There is also a preference for raising Merino sheep, a breed with high wool yield and loose, wrinkled skin which makes the animal very susceptible to breecstrike.

## *Possible Solutions*

Dr. Shelton has pointed out that in the United States, sheep are bred for smoother skin: the less breec wrinkle, the less chance for blowfly infestation. A possible solution to the problem of mulesing is widespread introduction of a breed to Australian producers which combines rapid wool growth with relatively smooth skin. The Rambouillet breed, which is in fact derived from the Merino, already has these characteristics.

Prevention through breeding improvement, without sacrificing either productivity or humane treatment, is an elegant solution in the long term, but the question remains of whether the mulesing operation, which is much more effective than insecticide sprays in Australia, can be modified now to eliminate unnecessary animal suffering and pain.

Traditionally, many livestock operations (castration, dehorning, debeaking, tail docking) have been performed without anesthesia. General or even epidural anesthesia does carry a certain mortality risk which may exceed the risk associated with the operation itself. In livestock production, where economic considerations are constantly influencing standards and practices, anesthetics may represent an additional financial burden to the producer. However, there may be some promise in the idea of developing an inexpensive topical anesthetic which could be incorporated into the mulesing procedure. The Australian Bureau of Animal Health has indicated its willingness to support animal welfare research. Providing the funds for a feasibility study of field anesthesia for mulesing would be one effective way of expressing this support.

Obviously, any attempt to work within the system on mulesing or other animal welfare issues results in compromises which are unacceptable to the

philosophical purists, whether their philosophy falls to the left of Animal Liberation or to the right of the hard-core dominionist. However, those who are most directly affected by the changes wrought from the debate between industry and the champions of reform are the farmer, the consumer and the animals themselves. When the needs of more than one group are taken into account, compromise is the most likely outcome.

The farmer may understand his or her animals better than the animal rights philosophers, the animal welfare lobbyist, or the managers of corporate agribusiness. Yet such familiarity with the object of concern does not necessarily imply that other sectors of society should have little or no part in trying to resolve the larger ethical questions of animal exploitation. Animal Lib may not have all the answers, but that does not preclude its ability to serve as a societal watchdog. In order to have maximum impact, however, its efforts must be backed up by data from applied animal welfare science as well as a thorough understanding of the economic arguments of producers and other representatives of the livestock industry. As stated by Wal Shaw, President of the Australian Broiler Growers Council, in an interview with *National Farmer* (November 29, 1979): "The Animal Lib stir has caused us to look at ourselves — and that's not a bad thing at all."

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