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## New sheep guidelines loom

**SHEEP producers could face legal action if they continue to carry out normal management practices.**

That's if draft animal welfare standards and guidelines are endorsed as they stand, confirming the "worst fears" of producers.

Grabbing a sheep by the wool to drag them out for shearing could become a thing of the past, while restricting the age of mulesing to less than six months could mean weather extremes and natural disasters would not be taken into account.

Australian Wool Innovation has taken the "unusual and unique step" of seeking legal advice, from four independent advisers, on the implications the standards and guidelines - a joint government and industry initiative co-ordinated by Animal Health Australia - could pose for wool growers.

It followed sheep representative bodies voicing concerns through AWI's wool grower industry consultative committee.

In a letter to industry, AWI chairman Wal Merriman said legal advice was that "these prescriptive guidelines could, and would, most likely be used to argue the case of the standards in a court of law".

Mr Merriman told *The Weekly Times* "with that knowledge we can't support the standards and guidelines as they are".

Australian Wool Growers Association accused the Department of Agriculture of trying to "silence" AWI.

A recent letter from AWGA to the Department of Agriculture, seen by *The Weekly Times*, claimed a department employee tried to "silence" AWI, and that if AWI intervened it would be "in contravention of its constitution".

"No interpretation by government staff should impede AWI's role as a catalyst to protect our industry against those who are either ill-informed or have a clear cut agenda," the letter said.

AWGA chairman Robert McBride said if the standards and guidelines were adopted "common sense could potentially be lost".

Mr McBride said the implications for wool growers were highlighted under section five of the standards, which deals with handling and husbandry, and states that a person must not "drag (a sheep) by the ears, tail or wool".



# AWGA - News Update

"When a shearer grabs a sheep to turn it over to shear it, they are effectively grabbing it by the wool, so does that mean we are going to ban shearing?" he said.

"If these standards are put in place, then it becomes the law and it will be set in stone."

Mr McBride said farmers were happy to have guidelines, but if ill-advised standards were approved it could "cripple our industry".

Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders vice-president Jock MacRae said the legal advice "confirmed our worst fears".

With Australia leading the way in animal welfare, Mr MacRae said the association did not believe there would be any extra beneficial outcome for welfare. "It will just tie people up in courts and waste ... money," he said. "If they become law, it will only drive people out of the industry."

The Department of Agriculture was unable to comment on the AWI silencing claims but a spokeswoman said "government and industry have agreed national standards and guidelines are needed".

Of 49 submissions for the sheep standards and guidelines published on the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines website, 27 were from industry bodies and 22 from animal liberation groups.

Submissions came from groups as obscure as the Cat Alliance of Australia and Vegan Australia, while the RSPCA lodged three.

Animal Health Australia collates all issues raised during public consultation to be combined into a document, which would be made publicly available on the website "as soon as practicable," an AHA spokeswoman said.

The standards will then be submitted for consideration by the Standing Council on Primary Industries next April.

Once approved they will then be referred to each Australian state and territory government for incorporation into their legislation next year.