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Global wool industry reviews mulesing standards, considers mandatory pain relief

The global wool industry will consider adding the mandatory use of pain relief during the mulesing of lambs to a document setting out welfare standards for producers.

The International Wool Textile Organisation (IWTO), touted as the global authority on standards for the wool industry, has agreed to review its sheep welfare guidelines to consider making pain relief a must, instead of "recommended".

IWTO agreed to consider the proposal following pressure from an Italian-led delegation in the lead up to last week's annual conference.

Sistema Moda Italia (SMI), a body representing Italy's textiles industry, wanted to put a resolution forward at the Sydney conference but agreed to refrain from public conversation following a commitment from IWTO president Peter Ackroyd to lead a review.

"I agreed with SMI to review the guidelines — and that's being done as we speak — and then revert to them in very early course," Mr Ackroyd said.

"That will be in September, in Dumfries House in Scotland [where a wool conference is due to take place].

"So on that occasion, I'd like to re-issue the guidelines and do what's called the 'Dumfries Declaration'."

Pain relief recommended but not enforced

While IWTO does not have any legal power to force growers into using pain relief, its recommendations act as a benchmark for wool producers, manufacturers and retailers across the globe.

Its membership comprises 60 per cent of total wool production world-wide and Mr Ackroyd said the guidelines laid out animal welfare standards for the consumer.

Market forces, such as paying premiums, will be far more effective than regulatory enforcement in driving the uptake of pain relief and changing on-farm practices.

Jo Hall, Wool Producers Australia chief executive

"It means that the elements of best practice have been codified to a certain extent," he said.



PHOTO: Mulesed merino sheep at the saleyards in Hay, south-west New South Wales (Laurissa Smith)



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"If people sign the guidelines, it means that they have actually committed themselves to them."

As it stands, the IWTO guidelines recommend the use of pain relief but do not require signatories to use anaesthetics.

"I think it's best animal welfare practice; pain relief is recommended," Mr Ackroyd said.

If it is best practice, why not make it mandatory?

"As I said, it's being looked into. There is a review of the sheep welfare guidelines, so we are moving forward," Mr Ackroyd said.

He said Australian industry bodies would "quite definitely" be part of discussions, which he agreed would be heated.

"It's not the first heated discussion I've had in the wool industry I can assure you, after 40 years," he said.

Incentives not compulsion, says Wool Producers Australia

The national body representing wool growers said farmers should be encouraged to apply pain relief to lambs during mulesing through premiums for their wool.

Wool Producers Australia (WPA) said pain relief was applied to the majority of Australian lambs, but farmers who did so were not being paid any extra.

What Australia usually experiences, if we don't satisfy the market, is we experience discounts. I'm more concerned about losing markets.

Peter Small, Victorian wool producer

Chief executive Jo Hall said incentives would be more effective than regulation but did not confirm that WPA was against a mandatory code.

"Market forces, such as paying premiums, will be far more effective than regulatory enforcement in driving the uptake of pain relief and changing on-farm practices," she said.

"In saying that, even though these price signals are not being realised in the trade, Australian wool growers are demonstrating their commitment to animal welfare by the voluntary use of pain relief."

Ms Hall said WPA would seek to be involved in the review of IWTO's sheep welfare guidelines.

"WPA were integral in the development of the IWTO guidelines and hope to be included in the review process to ensure that Australian growers and the on-farm husbandry procedures that are essential, and in some cases unique to Australian production conditions, are considered," she said.

"The voluntary uptake of pain relief by Australian wool growers is a huge success story for the industry, which should be applauded.

"According to Australian Wool Innovation, pain relief is applied to the majority of all lambs mulesed and it is imperative that wool growers declare their mulesing status and pain relief usage on the National Wool Declaration."

Australian Wool Innovation skirts issue

Australian Wool Innovation, which is funded by wool growers and the Federal Government, declined to comment on whether it supported mandatory use of pain relief.

A spokesman said AWI refused to engage in the resolution raised by the Italian industry at the IWTO conference.

"In promoting Australian wool in all key global markets, AWI celebrates how Australian woolgrowers lead the world in animal welfare, including the use of Australian developed pre and post operative pain relief," a statement sent to ABC Rural said.

"Since 2005, AWI has invested \$59 million in animal welfare projects such as Lifetime Ewe Management and \$33 million specifically in flystrike prevention such as ASBVs now in use, liquid nitrogen successfully trialled, blowfly genome now mapped."

'We're losing markets' says Victorian wool grower



Photo: [Peter Small is urging the Australian wool industry to adopt a code guaranteeing consumers mandatory pain relief for lambs.](#) (ABC Rural: Danielle Grindlay)

A Victorian wool grower and director of a knitwear company is urging his peers to support a standard that guarantees consumers anaesthetics will be used when mulesing.

Peter Small said the process would cost producers about \$1 per sheep, which he said would secure markets for Australian wool.



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"We are on the brink of actually really getting out of the commodity culture and getting into the luxury fibre market," Mr Small said.

"That's where we'll start to get premiums for our wool, but we've got to have the story right, we've got to have the product right and we can't be seen to be duplicitous."

Mr Small conceded farmers who do use pain relief were not being paid any extra than those who did not and in fact, his neighbour gave up the practice because there were no premiums.

But Mr Small said the need to adopt the practice was not about seeking a financial boost, but about keeping customers.

"What Australia usually experiences, if we don't satisfy the market, is we experience discounts," he said.

"I'm more concerned about losing markets."

Mr Ackroyd, who is also the global strategic advisor for The Woolmark Company, disagreed.

He said demand for non-mulesed wool, or wool from mulesed sheep that were treated with anaesthetic, was "relatively slack".

"There is demand there but I don't see it being massive," Mr Ackroyd said.

"I don't think the demand actually responds to the loudness of the voices discussing it, quite honestly."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-13/global-wool-industry-reviews-mulesing-standards-pain-relief/7323830>