

Humane World for Animals™

Formerly called Humane Society International Australia

Ending live lamb cutting (mulesing)

Australia is the only country in the world where live lamb cutting (also known as mulesing) is still widely used. More than 10 million lambs are subjected to this painful surgical intervention each year.

It is done to prevent flystrike, but there is a more humane, practical, and profitable alternative: thousands of wool farmers across Australia have already shown that breeding flystrike-resistant sheep, rather than highly wrinkled Merino sheep, can end the need for live lamb cutting.

Flystrike costs the Australian sheep industry more than $320 million annually, yet flystrike prone sheep are still being bred. A 2023 Meat & Livestock Australia study found that 71% of producers who mules sheep were unlikely to stop, highlighting the limits of voluntary change. Only 25% of wool sold at auction is non-mulesed.

The Australian Veterinary Association supports a planned, time-bound phase-out of mulesing, mandatory multimodal pain relief during the transition, and an urgent review of the *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep* (Sheep Standards). Government leadership is needed to act on their recommendations.

Global demand for non-mulesed wool is rising and often exceeds available supply. Hundreds of global fashion brands are rejecting mulesed wool.

Humane World for Animals is calling on ministers to:

1. **Establish an urgent review of the *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep***

2. **Agree a nationally agreed, time-bound phase-out of live lamb cutting**

3. **Mandate multimodal pain relief during the transition period immediately**

4. **Support wool farmers to breed flystrike-resistant sheep**

5. **Support the development of an Australia-wide transition plan**

Top image: Dreamstime Images

WARNING: This briefing contains images of lambs after live lamb cutting

Live lamb cutting causes avoidable suffering

Live lamb cutting involves cutting away strips of skin from around a lamb's breech using shears. Scientific evidence shows the procedure causes acute pain, distress and behavioural changes.



While the wool industry often cites pain relief use of around 90%, this typically involves applying a topical anaesthetic *after* the lamb's skin has been cut away. Studies have documented significant pain-related behaviours following live lamb cutting, including reduced feeding and walking, abnormal postures, and increased wound sensitivity (Edwards et al, 2011; Hemsworth et al, 2009).

The Australian Veterinary Association supports mandatory multimodal pain relief during the transition, combining local anaesthesia and systemic pain relief. However, this only reduces the suffering caused and pain can persist for up to three weeks. Preventing the need for a painful procedure altogether through good breeding practices is the best welfare solution.

The solution already exists

Traditional, highly wrinkled 'heavy-skinned' Merinos were selectively bred to maximise wool production, but this also increased their susceptibility to flystrike under Australian conditions.

Thousands of Australian wool farmers have shown that breeding less wrinkled, flystrike-resistant sheep can eliminate the need for live lamb cutting while maintaining, and often improving, profitability.

The 2020 BG Economics report, *Towards a Non-Mulesed Future,* surveyed 97 Australian wool farmers and found that producers who transitioned to plain-bodied sheep reported a range of benefits, including improved lamb survival, higher reproductive performance, reduced management costs and improved profitability.



References:
Edwards LE, Arnold NA, Butler KL, Hemsworth PH (2011). Acute effects of mulesing and alternative procedures to mulesing on lamb behaviour. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 133, Issues 3–4, Pages 169-174, ISSN 0168-1591: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2011.05.014
Hemsworth PH, Barnett JL, Karlen GM, Fisher AD, Butler KL, Arnold NA (2009). Effects of mulesing and alternative procedures to mulesing on the behaviour and physiology of lambs. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 117, Issues 1–2, Pages 20-27, ISSN 0168-1591: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2008.12.007

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Bottom image: The late Dr Jim Watts, SRS Merino.

What wool farmers are saying

"Through genetics and good management, you can quickly change a sheep within two generations (to one) that doesn't need mulesing... it is just time we moved on." **Dr Charles Massy OAM, wool farmer and author.**

"We haven't mulesed since 2005 ... It's an easy-care sheep, so we're not having to spend so much time with them, chasing flies or drenching them ... and we have more lambs on the ground each year." **Norm Smith, fourth-generation wool farmer.**

"We've got sheep now that don't need to be mulesed." **Doug Wright, Australian wool farmer**

A 2020 BG Economics report, *Towards a Non-Mulesed Future,* surveyed 97 Australian wool farmers and found that **producers who transitioned to plain-bodied sheep reported a range of benefits** including improved lamb and ewe survival, increased lamb growth rates. reduced breech and body strike, easier flock management, improved feed conversion efficiency, improved drought and heat tolerance and easier shearing. It also revealed that:

- 84% reported an increased return on investment
- 83.5% said transitioning was not costly
- 77.5% completed the transition within five years
- 86.6% would recommend this solution to other wool farmers



Traditional highly wrinkled 'heavy-skinned' Merino rams, unsuited to Australian conditions



Flystrike-resistant Merino rams

Reference: BG Economics (2020), *Towards a Non-Mulesed Future: Selective Breeding to Counteract Flystrike in Australian Merino Sheep*

Left Image: John Carnemolla/Australian Picture Library. Right image: Georgie Dolphin, Humane World for Animals Australia

Key elements of a national transition

1. Review and update the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep
2. Establish a nationally agreed, time-bound phase-out of live lamb cutting
3. Implement the phase-out through state and territory legislation
4. Introduce mandatory multimodal pain relief in all jurisdictions during the transition
5. Government and industry investment in breeding, genetic improvement, and extension programs to support wool farmers
6. Maintain ongoing consultation with industry, veterinarians and other stakeholders

A national pathway to end live lamb cutting

Humane World for Animals does not support an overnight ban of live lamb cutting that could leave sheep vulnerable to flystrike. Instead, we support a nationally coordinated, time-bound phase-out that gives wool farmers the certainty, support and tools needed to successfully breed flystrike-resistant sheep.

Humane World for Animals also encourages brands and retailers to commit to sourcing wool from sheep that have not been subjected to live lamb cutting.

Veterinarians, consumers, brands and many wool farmers already support a phase out of live lamb cutting. With government leadership, Australia can accelerate the transition to proven breeding solutions that protect sheep from flystrike naturally, and end the need for painful live lamb cutting Australia-wide. Scan the QR code to learn more.



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Image: Dreamstime Images

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