



# MARKET LAMB DOCKING

## *The Better Way*

Ross A. Jacobson, 4-H Youth Development Specialist  
Jim C. Jensen, Extension 4-H Youth Agent  
Dr. W. Craig Burrell, Extension Livestock Specialist

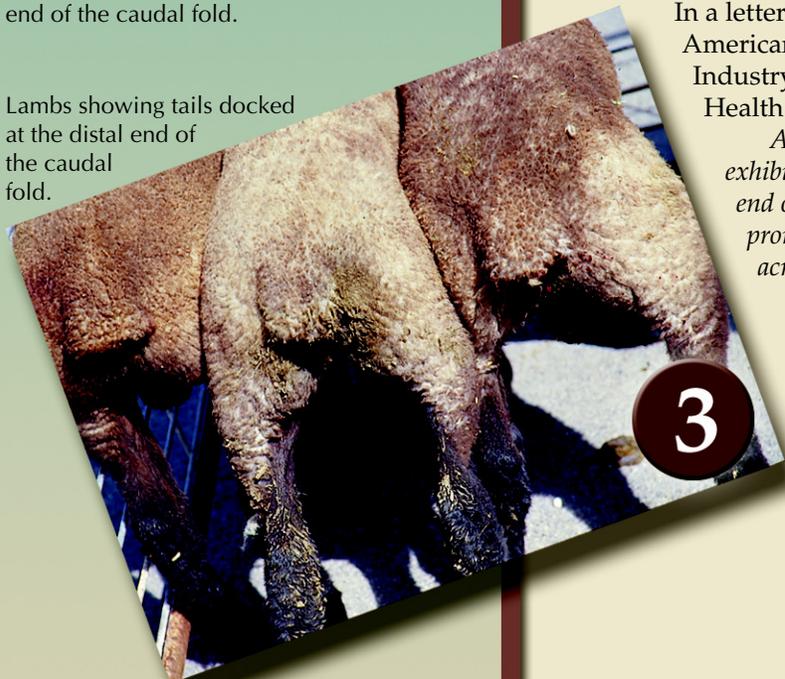


Lamb with Burdizzo pincers applied at distal end of caudal fold. Tail is removed behind the pincers with a knife.



Lamb with elastrator in place at the distal end of the caudal fold.

Lambs showing tails docked at the distal end of the caudal fold.



**T**ail removal or docking of lambs by the commercial sheep industry is a standard management practice. When properly docked, the tail or dock will be long enough that when lifting the tail to defecate, the caudal folds on the under side of the tail are raised. This helps direct the feces away from the body, preventing contamination of the hind quarters. A properly docked tail will: help prevent fly strike; provide coverage of the perineal and vulvar areas; protect against harsh weather; and not interfere with reproductive processes.

Ideally, docking should be done within the first two weeks following birth, using one of the following methods: knife, shears, hot iron pincers or chisels, emasculator, Burdizzo pincers, or elastrators.

Holding the lamb's front and rear legs together on either side of the lamb's body and resting the rump on a firm platform, table or bench, the tail will naturally extend away from the body revealing the caudal folds as shown in both pictures 1 and 2. Using any of the tools outlined above, the tail is easily removed or restricted with an elastrator, which will cause the tail to drop off in a short period of time.

There may be minimal variations in caudal fold lengths between sheep breeds and sexes. However, when properly docked, the remaining tail will measure 1 1/8 to 1 1/2 inches in length as shown in picture 3. When inspecting the docked tail, the caudal fold will be visible on the underside of the tail.

In recent years many 4-H and FFA Jr. Livestock exhibitors and show lamb producers have adopted the practice of severe tail docking. Such procedures have been termed "**Extreme tail docking in sheep**" by the American Veterinary Medical Association. Extreme tail docking is typically shorter than the caudal tail fold and has evolved to the point of surgical removal of caudal vertebrae often resulting in the loss of innervation (nerves) to the rectum and anal sphincter that comes from sacral vertebra 3 to caudal vertebra 5, predisposing lambs to rectal prolapse. The condition is painful, and repair is unprofitable. Therefore, docking lambs' tails to the proper length is necessary to avoid negative physiological and economic consequences.

In a letter to the National 4-H Program Leader and signed by the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Sheep Industry, the American Farm Bureau, and the United States Animal Health Association, the following recommendation was made:

*Animals (lambs) born after January 1, 2002, will be accepted for exhibition only if tails are not docked shorter than the level of the distal end of the caudal tail fold. We believe that adopting this rule will promote uniformity and improve the health and welfare of show sheep across the country.*

*Photos by Gary L. Neuenswander, Agricultural Experiment Station*

Utah State University is an affirmative action/equal opportunity employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University.

Sponsored in part by: Utah State University Extension 4-H Youth Program, Utah Future Farmers of America Association, and the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food.

