

Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council



Animal Welfare Guidelines for **SHEEP** **FARMERS**



THE DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE & FOOD
AN ROINN TALMHAÍOCHTA AGUS BIA

***Animal Welfare
Guidelines For
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FARMERS***

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AN INTRODUCTION BY PROFESSOR PATRICK FOTTRELL

Chairperson of the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council

The Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council was set up to allow representative groups with a variety of perspectives on animal welfare, meet and exchange views, seek consensus on various issues and developments relevant to the care of farm animals. These guidelines are the product of this consensus and have been adopted unanimously by the council.

Having reviewed existing guidelines within the European Union, the Council have developed these with the intention of encouraging sheep farmers to adopt and maintain the highest standards of husbandry.

The Council acknowledges that good farm animal welfare has been an integral part of Irish livestock farming which is largely grass based and extensive by nature.

The Council has adopted the best farm animal husbandry practices and welfare standards which take account of the five basic needs ;

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
4. Freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour
5. Freedom from fear and distress

In maintaining these guidelines sheep farmers can demonstrate Ireland's prominence in the practice of farm animal welfare standards.

Professor Patrick Fottrell
Chairperson



THE FIVE FREEDOMS CONCEPT

In essence, an animal welfare Code of Practice is the application of sensible and sensitive animal husbandry practices to the livestock present on the farm. Animal welfare is concerned with the well being of the animal and complements the objectives of sheep assurance schemes that demonstrate the production of safe lamb to consumers and food chain stakeholders.

Welfare codes usually list five basic freedoms that should underpin animal welfare best practice at farm level. The five freedoms are listed below and provide an overall concept of animal welfare.

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
4. Freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour
5. Freedom from fear and distress

All sheep farmers should be aware of the welfare needs of their sheep and be capable of safeguarding them under all foreseeable conditions before being given responsibility for a flock. This requires the acquisition of specific stockmanship skills which may be developed on-farm, working with an experienced person, or by following a course offered by a suitable training organisation. Wherever possible, the training should be of a type which leads to formal recognition of competence.

GOOD STOCKMANSHIP

Stockmanship is a key factor in animal welfare. Wherever possible, the training should be of a type which leads to formal recognition of competence. The stockman should have training and or the necessary experience in sheep husbandry. Without competent diligent stockmanship animal welfare will be compromised.

A competent stockman should be able to:

- recognise whether or not the animals are in good health (signs of ill health include: loss of appetite, listlessness, cessation of cudding, discharge from eyes or nostrils, dribbling, persistent coughing, lameness, swollen joints, scouring, rapid loss of condition or emaciation, excessive scratching, abnormal skin conditions or other unusual conditions)
- understand the significance of a change in the behaviour of the animals
- know when veterinary treatment is required
- implement a planned herd health programme (e.g. preventative treatments, vaccination programmes if necessary)

- implement appropriate animal feeding and grassland management programmes
- recognise if the general environment (indoors or outdoors) is adequate for the promotion of good health and welfare
- have management skills appropriate to the scale and technical requirements of the production system
- handle animals with care, avoiding undue stress

Herding

Sheep farmers should know the signs of good health in sheep. These include general alertness, free movement, active feeding and rumination and absence of lameness, visible wounds, abscesses or injuries. Sheep farmers should also know the signs which indicate ill-health in sheep. These include listlessness, abnormal posture and behaviour, lameness, scouring, absence of cudding, persistent coughing or panting, scratching and frequent rubbing, rapid loss of body condition, excessive wool loss, and, in some circumstances, being apart from the flock.

It is important for a farmer to ensure that enough time is available within the normal work routine for the flock to be properly inspected and for any necessary remedial action to be taken.

All animals kept in husbandry systems in which their welfare depends on frequent human attention should be inspected at least once a day. It may be necessary to engage extra help such as experienced, competent contractors to provide extra assistance during busy periods such as lambing, shearing, routine dipping and other disease prevention treatments; or when regular staff are unavailable due to holiday or sickness.

HEALTH – GOOD HUSBANDRY/HYGIENE

Husbandry practices should minimise stress to the animal. All farms should have proper animal handling facilities including pens and a crush where an animal can be restrained with minimum risk of injury or stress. Good handling facilities also benefit the safety of the personnel involved in handling the animals (Health and safety Act, 1989).

Health and Safety

All farmers are reminded that they have specific statutory responsibilities under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989. Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 1993. These should be addressed in your safety statement.

Careful Veterinary Procedures

Only authorized animal remedies must be sourced through the legal routes of supply. The number and type of sheep kept and the stocking rate and/or housing density should

depend on the suitability of the environment, the capacity of the farm, the competence of the sheep farmer and the time available to carry out his or her duties. If any change in breed or type is contemplated, particularly if farming in difficult, extensive conditions, replacement should only be with a breed or type of sheep that is suitable for the location. For example, on hill farms sheep should be sufficiently hardy and not prone to suffer as a result of extremes of climate.

All animals which appear to be ill or injured should be cared for appropriately without delay; and where they do not respond to care, veterinary advice must be obtained as soon as possible.

Common veterinary type activities must always be carried out in a manner that minimises stress. Sheep farmers should be experienced or trained and be competent across the range of health and welfare skills which should include vaccination; drenching to control internal parasites; prevention of foot rot and treatment of lame sheep; prevention and treatment of internal and external parasites including scab and fly strike; tail docking and castration. It is particularly important that sheep farmers have competence in the skills required at lambing time.

Records

The FAWAC would recommend that proper records* are maintained on the farm. Some of these records help producers to demonstrate that best practice has been implemented in relation to animal health, welfare standards and traceability. Key records include:

- Sheep Flock Register (Including disposal of animal carcasses)
- Animal Remedies Record
- Animal Feed Records

The FAWAC recommends that producers maintain a planned herd health programme checklist. Some retailer assurance schemes also require producers to document recommended operating procedures in the event of an emergency (fire in a livestock shed, operational guidelines for replacement stockperson in the event that the stockperson is away).

Feed and Water

- feeding and watering equipment should be designed, constructed, placed and maintained so that contamination of food and water and the harmful effects of competition between animals are minimised
- no other substance, with the exception of those given for therapeutic or prophylactic purposes should be administered to animals

*Record keeping is a legal requirement.

Diet

The diet of sheep should always be adequate to maintain full health and vigour. Feed and water should never be totally withheld for management purposes such as drying off ewes. Sudden changes in the type and quantity of feed should be avoided.

Sheep should be provided with fresh feed, and any which is stale or contaminated should be removed from troughs before more is added. Feed should be palatable and of good quality. It is especially important to dispose of silage which has deteriorated in storage or in the feed trough.

Systems involving the use of high intakes of cereal-based diets require a gradual introductory feeding period, during which sufficient roughage or a suitable high fibre concentrate should also be fed. Care should be taken to prevent individual sheep from gorging by ensuring that there is plenty of trough space available to the flock. In such systems mineral mixtures should be specifically designed to avoid urinary problems in male animals.

For sheep given concentrate feed, when all animals are fed together, it is important to have adequate trough space to avoid competition and aggression. In normal practice, approximately 30 cm of trough space is needed for hill ewes and approximately 45 cm for the larger lowland ewes. Excessive competition is detrimental to sheep welfare.

When feeding hay and silage *ad libitum*, trough space should normally be provided within the range 10-12 cm per ewe, dependent upon size. Racks and troughs should be positioned and designed to avoid injury, discomfort and damage to sheep.

Certain substances, in particular copper, can be harmful to sheep. Compound feeds or mineral preparations which have been prepared for other species should be avoided unless the composition can be assessed as suitable for sheep. Sheep farmers should be aware of breed variations in susceptibility to copper poisoning.

Water bowls and troughs should be constructed and sited so as to avoid fouling and to minimise the risk of water freezing in cold weather.

Troughs should be designed and installed in such a way as to ensure small lambs cannot get into them and drown.

Arrangements should be made in advance to ensure that adequate supplies of suitable feed and water can be made available to sheep in emergencies, such as severe winter storms or summer drought.

Sheep farmers should consider the state of the flock's dentition when planning a culling programme. Sheep with poor teeth should preferably be culled. If the sheep are to be retained they should be provided with food which they can eat without difficulty and their body condition should be carefully monitored.

Condition Scoring

Sheep farmers should be aware that the use of condition scoring can contribute significantly to good husbandry. Condition scoring is an easy technique to learn and allows the body reserves of individual sheep to be assessed quickly.

Lameness

Lameness is a significant animal welfare problem. In an animal, lameness, is usually an indication of pain. Lameness in sheep is one of the most common signs of ill-health and discomfort. It has clear adverse welfare implications and also affects the performance and production of both ewes and rams. A significant percentage of sheep with chronic lameness may be indicative of poor overall welfare standards within the flock.

Lameness can originate in the feet or joints, although in adult sheep the foot is the most common site.

Correct hoof trimming is of primary importance in the treatment of claw lesions, occasionally supplemented with antibiotic therapy (following veterinary surgeon examination) may be required. Use of footbaths is necessary in the control of lameness.

Shearing

Adult sheep should be shorn at the appropriate time to prevent heat stress during hot weather.

Castration

Sheep farmers should consider carefully whether castration is necessary within any particular flock. Castration is unlikely to be necessary if lambs will be finished and sent to slaughter before reaching sexual maturity. The procedure should only be carried out when lambs are likely to be retained after puberty and where it is necessary to avoid welfare problems associated with the management of entire males. In any case castration should be carried out before seven days of age.

Tail docking

Sheep's tails should not be docked routinely, only if there is a real threat of fly strike. Sheep farmers should consider carefully whether tail docking within a particular flock is necessary. Tail docking may be carried out only if failure to do so would lead to subsequent welfare problems because of dirty tails and potential fly strike. If it is considered that both tail docking and castration are necessary, thought should be given to performing both operations simultaneously so as to minimise disruption through repeated handling and the potential for mis-mothering and distress. In any case the use of tail docking should be carried out before seven days of age.

Pasture

Pasture management should form an integral part of disease control and especially so in the case of internal parasites and foot-rot where total reliance on drugs is best avoided. Particular attention should be paid to sheep, including rams, which are to be introduced into an established flock, since diseases can easily be spread.

Parasites

As external parasites such as those causing scab or fly strike, ticks or lice, are likely to occur, sheep should be protected by an approved method of treatment or the use of an approved effective preventive agent. Vigilance in relation to external parasites should be increased during high risk periods.

Internal parasites should be controlled by grazing management and/or anthelmintic treatment administered at appropriate times based upon the life cycle of the parasite.

Sick or injured animals

Injured, ailing or distressed sheep should be identified, attended to and veterinary advice should be sought without delay.

GENERAL MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Animals not kept in buildings should, where necessary and possible, be given protection from adverse weather conditions, predators and risk to their health and should, at all times, have access to a well-drained lying area.

All sheep farmers should have easily operated and efficient handling pens to facilitate routine management and treatment on a size and scale to suit the flock numbers.

When sheep are to be transported, adequate collecting, loading and unloading facilities should be available on the farm.

Sheep should not be caught by the fleece alone. They should be handled or restrained by means of a hand or an arm under the neck (holding the neck wool, if necessary) with the other arm placed on or around the rear. Lifting or dragging sheep by the fleece, tail, ears, horns or legs is unacceptable.

Fencing

Fences and hedges should be well maintained so as to avoid injury to sheep and prevent entanglement. Where any type of mesh fencing is used, particularly for horned sheep and around lambing fields, it should be checked frequently so that any animals which are caught can be released.

Electric fences should be designed, installed, used and maintained so that contact with them does not cause more than momentary discomfort to the sheep. Electric mesh fencing should not be used for horned sheep.

Mismothering

Account should be taken not only of the pain and distress caused by castration or other interventions but also the stress imposed by gathering and handling and the potential risk of infection. For very young lambs gathered in large groups there is a real risk of mismothering which may lead ultimately to serious welfare problems.

Pregnancy and Lambing

The nutritional management of pregnant ewes is particularly important. Both condition scoring and scanning can be of benefit.

Pregnant and nursing ewes should receive adequate food to ensure the development of healthy lambs and to maintain the health and bodily condition of the ewe.

Scanning can be a valuable aid to management. However, scanning is simply a tool to assist good husbandry not a replacement for it.

Heavily pregnant ewes should be handled with care to avoid distress and injury which may precipitate premature lambing. However, if a heavily pregnant ewe requires treatment eg for lameness, she should receive appropriate treatment as soon as possible and not be left untreated until after lambing. A large proportion of ewe mortalities occur during the period around lambing so particular skill and expertise are required at this time. Heavily pregnant ewes and young lambs should not be transported or taken to a livestock market.

Sheep farmers should pay particular attention to cleanliness and hygiene of equipment and pens during pregnancy and lambing, with particular attention to hygienic procedures during lambing.

There may be times when even a proficient farmer experiences difficulty in delivering a lamb single handed. In such cases veterinary assistance should be called for immediately. Special attention should be paid to ewes in the post lambing period to observe and correct any discomfort arising due to straining or prolapse.

Every effort should be made to prevent the build-up and spread of infection by ensuring that lambing pens are provided with adequate, clean bedding and are regularly cleansed. It is particularly important to ensure that dead lambs and afterbirths are removed and disposed of in a suitable manner without delay. The Control of Dogs Act (1986) includes provisions making it an offence for a person knowingly to permit a carcase to remain unburied in a place to which dogs could gain access.

Disposal

National legislation requires that all sheep which have died on the farm (or have been killed but not slaughtered for human consumption) be disposed of by rendering in approved premises, or if the carcase(s) is/are in a place where access is difficult or the amount and distance to approved rendering premises do not justify transporting it, by burial, only under licence.

Artificial rearing

It is essential that all lambs should start with an adequate supply of colostrum.

Where young lambs are being reared at pasture without their mothers, care should be taken to ensure that they have adequate shelter.

Shelter belts should be provided in locations where sheep and lambs are exposed to the elements.

HOUSING/FACILITIES

General

Winter housing of sheep can improve welfare but problems of both disease and welfare can arise when large numbers are kept together and advice should be sought on the design, construction or modification of buildings. Adequate ventilation without draughts is of particular importance, as also is the provision of sufficient trough space and lying area.

All floors should be designed, constructed and maintained so as to avoid discomfort, stress or injury to the sheep. Regular maintenance is essential.

Solid floors should be well-drained and the sheep provided with dry bedding. Newly-born and young lambs should not be put on slatted floors unless suitable bedding is also provided. Regarding slatted floors part of the floor area should be solid and suitable bedding material should be provided.

Where sheep are kept in a building, adequate lighting (whether fixed or portable) should be available to enable them to be thoroughly inspected at any time.

Animals kept in buildings must not be kept in permanent darkness. Where the natural light available in a building is insufficient to meet the physiological and ethological needs of any animals being kept in it then appropriate artificial lighting should be provided. Throughout the hours of daylight the level of indoor lighting, natural or artificial, should be such that all housed sheep can be seen clearly by the sheep farmer. Animals kept in buildings must not be kept without an appropriate period of rest from artificial lighting.

Other Emergency Precautions

Farmers should make advance plans for dealing with emergencies such as fire, flood or disruption of supplies and should ensure that all staff are familiar with the appropriate emergency action.

To minimise the risk of sheep being trapped in snow or being unable to gain shelter, care should be taken in siting shelters, shelter belts and fences.

Any dog is a potential hazard to sheep and should be kept under control on agricultural land. Sheepdogs should be regularly wormed to eliminate endoparasites. The Control of Dogs Act (1986) lays down measures for the protection of livestock against dogs.

APPENDIX I: SHEEP – HANDLING GUIDELINES/ FACILITIES

Basic Principles

- Sheep like to follow rather than be driven
- Prefer to move uphill and towards the horizon
- Prefer to move away from buildings

- Move towards open
- Move toward other sheep
- Flow better around curves or slight corners

Siting of handling facilities

- Near centre of grazing area especially if grazing area is some distance from farmyard
- Easy access, roadway linking paddocks is ideal
- Sheltered and shaded
- Good drainage, sloping site
- Water supply
- Large/fragmented farms will require more than one handling area

Holding Pens

- Must hold large group of sheep on farm at one time
- Allow 0.5 m²/ewe (5.5 ft./ewe)
- Fenced paddocks will do
- Avoid square pens
- Maximum width 4.5m (15 ft.)

Race

- Width 35cm to 50 cm. (14" to 20")
- Sloping sides helpful. 20-30 cm (8" to 12") at bottom, 46 to 60 cm (18" to 24") at top
- A gap at bottom of race is worthwhile
- All edges must be rounded
- Base length should be 4.5 – 6 metres (15 – 20 ft)
- Sorting gate and stop gate
- Curved entrance to race plus clear view through race
- Forcing pen needed if dip or footbath also involved
- Height 0.9m (3ft.)

Footbath

- Usually located in narrow race, but can be located separately. Bath itself may be portable and placed in race when needed
- Floor of bath usually consists of longitudinal ridges, or has a convex base
- A 10ft. long bath is the length recommended so that the solution will penetrate feet in time taken to walk through
- The footbath solution should be renewed frequently as it becomes soiled

Dipping Tanks

- Circular or rectangular
- 0.5 gals./sheep dipped (minimum)
- Disguise entry to tank
- Forcing gate necessary
- Can enter tank forward, backwards or from side
- Slide side entry (decoy sheep)
- Need one minute in tank/ewe
- Avoid pollution. Used dip to be removed by vacuum tanker or pump and spread on land. Don't graze land for 4 weeks after application
- Depth 1.2 m (4ft.) plus
- Width 1' at bottom, 3' at top
- Length 11ft

Draining Pens

- Allow sheep drain for 10minutes
- A full fleece can carry 8 gallons of dip
- Fall in floor of 1:20
- Low kerbs and channel. Flow to a filter 1' X 1' by 10" deep
- Allow 0.5m²/ewe (5.5 ft.)
- Need to be able to hold approx. 15 ewes being dipped

Forcing Pens

- Circular in shape with central mounted gate

APPENDIX 2:

LIST OF LEGISLATION ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMAL WELFARE

There is a considerable body of national and EU regulations governing animal health, husbandry and welfare issues. A current list of relevant animal welfare legislation is available from the Animal Health and Welfare Division of the Department of Agriculture and Food, Kildare Street, Dublin 2.

For further information please contact:
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