

# Wool Sheep Welfare

**International Wool  
Textile Organisation**

Humankind has been caring for sheep since 10,000 BCE. There are more than 1000 breeds of sheep in the world today. The Merino is probably the best known, being one of the most historically relevant and economically influential because of the excellent wool it produces.

In 2018, 1.1 billion sheep produced just over 2 million tonnes of raw wool for clothing and other textiles.<sup>1</sup>

## What is Animal Welfare?

Animal welfare is a complex and multi-faceted subject with scientific, ethical, economic, cultural, social, religious and political dimensions. It is attracting growing interest from civil society and is one of the priorities of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). The OIE, at the request of its Member Countries, is the international organisation responsible for setting standards on this topic.

The IWTO and OIE maintain a Memorandum of Understanding and work together to ensure that the highest standards of animal welfare and biosecurity are met.



Each wool producing country – Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom, United States, and Uruguay – has a set of animal welfare laws which wool growers are bound to uphold, and a corresponding set of best practice regulations to guide animal husbandry practices. These animal husbandry management tools are highly specific to each country's production system, environment, and sheep breed.

## The Five Freedoms

As the global authority for animal welfare, the OIE has defined its "Five Freedoms" for the care of animals which are recognised internationally:<sup>2,3</sup>

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

Good animal welfare means that an animal is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, is not suffering from pain, fear or distress, and is able to express behaviours that are important for its physical and mental state.

Good animal welfare includes disease prevention and appropriate veterinary care, shelter, management and nutrition, a stimulating and safe environment, humane handling and humane slaughter or killing.



Learn more with the IWTO Specifications for Wool Sheep Welfare, available at [www.iwto.org/work/wool-sheep-welfare](http://www.iwto.org/work/wool-sheep-welfare)

## Mulesing

Mulesing is a surgical procedure primarily practiced in some regions of Australia which are prone to flystrike. These regions typically have moist and damp weather conditions which are ideal for the blowfly (*Lucilia cuprina*). The fly is attracted to the breech area of the sheep by urine and faeces. It lays eggs in the wool and when the eggs hatch, the maggots start eating the sheep alive. To prevent this cruelty to the sheep, some of the skin around the rear of the sheep gets cut away once when it is still a lamb – this procedure is called mulesing.

No farmer who muleses does so callously or casually, as some animal activists claim. The procedure is done to prevent disease, suffering and death.

Where possible wool growers in Australia have stopped mulesing on their farm. In areas where sheep are in danger of flystrike due to the natural conditions, more and more wool growers are using methods to make the procedure painless by using pre- and post-operative pain relief or avoiding it entirely by breeding sheep with fewer skin folds. With these efforts, the number of lambs who need to be mulesed is shrinking.<sup>4</sup>

## Traceability

The mulesing status of a wool bale can be found on IWTO Test Certificates. Top-makers buy wool on the basis of IWTO Test Certificates, and this way the mulesing status is fed into the supply chain.

See our fact sheet on Wool Test Certificates for more information.

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<sup>1</sup> IWTO – IWTO Market Information – Edition 14 - Statistics for the Global Wool Production and Textile Industry. Published Spring 2019.

<sup>2</sup> OIE World Organisation for Animal Health – International Standards

<sup>3</sup> OIE World Organisation for Animal Health Terrestrial Health Code Chapter 7.1.2 Animal Welfare

<sup>4</sup> AWI – Breech Flystrike Monitoring Progress: <https://www.wool.com/sheep/welfare/breech-flystrike/progress/> (accessed 17/09/2019)