# Sheep handling

## Animal welfare activity

The [Australian animal welfare standards and guidelines for the welfare of sheep [PDF 1.2MB]](http://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au/files/2011/01/Sheep-Standards-and-Guidelines-for-Endorsed-Jan-2016-061017.pdf) have been developed to help everyone who works with sheep know how sheep must be treated and cared for. They apply to everyone across Australia. They have been developed jointly by the government, industry, and the community. Figure 1 shows how these standards and guidelines have been developed and who they apply to.

Figure – Development and application of Australian welfare standards for sheep



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These standards and guidelines make it clear that everyone who works with sheep must know and understand the standards and guidelines and is responsible for the welfare of the sheep they manage or work with.

A sample of the guidelines has been selected and placed into the table below. For each selected guideline, a reason for why it is important in relation to animal welfare has been given. You need to complete the right-hand side column by providing an example of how the guideline can be put into practice. You may wish to work as a group to complete this task.

### Standard 1.1

A person must take reasonable actions to ensure the welfare of sheep under their care.

Table – Responsibilities

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G1.1 Understanding sheep behaviour and use of low stress stock handling techniques | Developing a good understanding of sheep behaviour will allow handlers to better understand how to minimise stress in animals. Reducing stress in animals enables easier handling and higher productivity levels. Using low stress handling techniques increases safety for both animals and handlers, improves efficiency and enhances productivity. | Sheep behaviour: Understanding that sheep prefer to be kept with other sheep and ensuring that sheep are never isolated from other sheepHandling: Using well-maintained and well-designed sheep handling facilities, for example, yards and race, reducing loud noises such as whip cracks, yelling, gates slamming and dogs barking where possible, and considering the impacts of weather on the type and stage of production of the sheep being handled |
| G1.1 Assessing the quantity, quality and continuity of feed and water supply | Animals require varying quantities and quality of feed and water depending on their breed, production stage, age and size and prevailing weather conditions. It is important to be able to assess quantity and quality of feed to ensure animals are getting appropriate feed amounts as an excess or deficiency of appropriate feed can lead to health issues and decrease in production. The more intensive the production system, the greater the need for monitoring levels of feed and water availability. | (Add example) |
| G1.1 Identifying distressed, weak, injured, or diseased sheep, and taking appropriate action | Quick identification of distressed, weak, injured, or diseased sheep can reduce the risk of health implications, decrease in production, death, and the spread of disease. It is important that any sheep that appear to be distressed, weak, injured, or diseased are identified, assessed, and handled/treated appropriately depending on their condition. | (Add example) |

### Standard 2.1

A person in charge must ensure sheep have reasonable access to adequate and appropriate feed and water.

Table – Feed and water

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G2.5 Regular assessment should be made of the needs of the sheep in relation to the quantity and quality of feed and water. | The dietary needs of sheep are dependent on the age, size, breed, and stage of production of the animal. These factors change frequently as the animal ages and production stage changes (for example, lactation, finishing, weaning) and therefore it is important to frequently assess the current needs of the animals in order to provide them with an appropriate amount and quality of feed and water. | (Add example) |
| G2.10 Sheep should be closely monitored during transition to varying water quality (e.g. mineral content, salinity, etc.) to ensure that they are drinking. Alternate water supplies should be provided if sheep are seen not to drink. | Measures must be taken to ensure that sheep are drinking adequately if their water supply changes. If sheep are not drinking, dehydration, heat stress and death can easily occur. It is important to closely monitor and implement strategies to ensure sheep are drinking. | (Add example) |

### Standards 3.1 to 3.3

**S3.1** A person in charge must take reasonable actions to ensure the welfare of sheep from threats, including extremes of weather, drought, fires, floods, disease, injury, and predation.

**S3.2** A person in charge must ensure the inspection of sheep at intervals, and at a level appropriate to the production system and the risks to the welfare of sheep.

**S3.3** A person in charge must ensure appropriate treatment for sick, injured, or diseased sheep at the first reasonable opportunity.

Table – Risk management of extreme weather, natural disasters, disease, injury, and predation

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G3.3 Sheep that appear to be isolated from the flock, caught in structures, or bogged should be inspected and appropriate action taken without delay. | Sheep can deteriorate in health rapidly if they are in some way restricted from shade, feed, and water, for example, if they become bogged or caught in a fence/structure. For this reason, it is essential that any sheep that are restricted from moving freely or isolated from the flock are inspected and treated accordingly. Sheep also become distressed when isolated from the flock and this can cause adverse health effects. Sheep that are isolated from the flock are commonly sick, blind, disorientated, or lost, and must be inspected, treated appropriately, and returned to the flock as soon as possible to prevent further sickness or stress. | (Add example) |
| G3.6 Sheep and lambs should be provided with adequate shelter. In the absence of natural protection, consideration should be given to the provision of shade, windbreaks, or sheds. | Sheep and lambs are very susceptible to cold/wet/windy conditions. Lambs and shorn sheep are particularly vulnerable in cold/wet conditions. A lack of shelter in these conditions can lead to death. | (Add example) |
| G3.7 Shorn sheep should be given protection during cold conditions and sudden weather changes. | Shorn sheep are particularly susceptible to cold/wet/windy conditions and can rapidly deteriorate in health and even die if they do not have adequate protection from adverse weather. | (Add example) |
| G3.10 Predator control programs should be implemented where predation is a risk to the welfare of sheep. | Sheep have a number of predators including foxes, dogs, and large birds and must be protected from these at all times to prevent injury and death. Sheep are a particularly vulnerable animal with minimal ability to defend themselves and their young, making it extremely important to provide a safe environment free from predators. | (Add example) |
| G3.14 Treatments and vaccines should be administered in accordance with directions. Records of treatments should be kept. | Treatments and vaccines are vital for controlling a range of parasites and pathogens and must always be administered at the recommended dose rates and in accordance with directions of use. Maintain records of chemical name, identification of animals treated, date of administration, batch number, expiry date, withholding period, dose rate and who treated the animals. This provides data for the safe and compliant sale of animals, and assists with biosecurity and advice for ongoing health management of the flock. | (Add example) |

### Standard 4.1

A person in charge must take reasonable actions in the construction, maintenance and operation of facilities and equipment to ensure the welfare of sheep.

Table – Facilities and equipment

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G4.1 Facility construction and modifications take into account: sheep behaviour, topography, flood and fire risk, climate, purpose, space, feed and water requirements, shade/shelter, surface materials and cleaning and waste disposals. | Careful construction of facilities including paddocks, yards, shelter, feeding equipment, water troughs and surface coverings can increase handling efficiency, decrease stress for animals, and increase safety for both animals and handlers. | (Add example) |
| G4.4 Facilities should be free from protrusions and obstacles that may cause injury. | Poorly maintained/broken/malfunctioning equipment and facilities can cause injury to sheep and handlers. Sheep can easily become injured by protruding objects in yards due to the speed that they move through yards. | (Add example) |

### Standards 5.1 to 5.8

The standards requirements for this section can be found in detail on pages 16 and 17 of the document at [Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep [PDF 1.2MB]](https://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au/sheep/).

Table – Handling and husbandry

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G5.1 Sheep should be handled to take advantage of their natural flocking behaviour when mustering, yarding, and handling. People handling sheep should have an understanding of the flight zone. | Sheep are animals that are preyed upon and hence seek protection and comfort from staying in the flock. Keeping the flock together when mustering and yarding increases the efficiency and safety for the sheep and handlers as well as significantly reducing stress on the sheep. Moving sheep is always more efficient when the flock’s flight zone is recognised and used advantageously. | (Add example) |
| G5.7 Temporary yards should be used where appropriate for husbandry procedures. | The use of temporary yards reduces the need for walking or transporting stock long distances. Temporary yards are particularly important when husbandry procedures need to be carried out on young lambs, pregnant ewes, rams, sheep that are a long distance from permanent yards or during extremely hot conditions. Using temporary yards reduces stress, illness, injury, heat stress, lameness and lambs being separated from mothers. | (Add example) |
| G5.8 Overcrowding of sheep in pens or yards should be avoided. Precautions should be taken to prevent smothering, especially for lambs and weaners. | Overcrowding can lead to smothering and heat stress which can rapidly lead to serious injury and death of sheep. Lambs and weaners are particularly susceptible to smothering. Extra care should be taken to limit stock numbers in pens and closely monitor areas or times when smothering is likely to occur. | (Add example) |
| G5.18 Sheep fitted with nets or coats should be inspected regularly to ensure that they do not become tangled, cast, or adversely affected by grass seeds. | Animals fitted with nets or coats can become stuck on fences, trees or other objects in paddocks and can also become caught up or cast in coats/nets. This can prevent animals from being able to access shade, water, feed and shelter and their flock. Sheep can easily become stressed, dehydrated, or suffer heat stress and starvation if they become tangled for a length of time, leading to health implications and death. Sheep fitted with coats and nets can also become flyblown or affected by grass seeds under their coats/nets. This may not seem apparent at a glance and requires close, regular inspection to avoid negative effects to the animals’ health and welfare. | (Add example) |
| G5.23 Sheep that grow and retain long wool should be shorn annually. | Sheep that are not shorn annually can suffer heat stress, build-up of grass seeds, inhibited vision and movement, increased chance of becoming flyblown, build-up of urine and faeces and increased vulnerability of predator attack. | (Add example) |

### Standards 6.1 to 6.4

**S6.1** A person performing tail docking or castration must have the relevant knowledge, experience, and skills, or be under the direct supervision of a person who has the relevant knowledge, experience, and skills.

**S6.2** A person must not tail dock sheep that are more than six months old without using appropriate pain relief and haemorrhage control for the sheep.

**S6.3** A person must leave a docked tail stump of a sheep with at least one palpable free joint remaining.

**S6.4** A person must not castrate or use the cryptorchid method on sheep that are more than six months old.

Table – Tail docking and castration

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G6.2 Tail docking and castration should be done after a secure maternal bond has been established, and after the lambs are 24 hours old. | Tail docking and castration requires animals to be mustered, yarded and lambs separated from their mothers. If separation occurs within 24 hours of lambing, lambs and ewes can easily become separated, resulting in mismothering and ewes rejecting lambs which often results in starvation and death. Mustering, yarding, and handling young lambs under 24 hours of age can also place them at high risk of health implications and death from stress and exhaustion. | (Add example) |
| G6.9 Lambs should be separated from their mothers for the shortest possible time. | Separating lambs from their mothers for extended periods of time can result in mismothering, rejection of lambs, lamb dehydration and stress, all of which can lead to health implications and death. | (Add example) |
| G6.20 The docked tail should be long enough to cover the vulva in female lambs and be of similar length in males. | The tail should be docked to a length that is long enough to cover the vulva in females or at the caudal fold as this reduces the risk of rectal prolapse and sun cancer to the skin under the tail. This length is also short enough to allow the sheep to raise the tail and prevent a build-up of faeces and dags. | (Add example) |

### Standards 7.1 to 7.5

**S7.1** A person performing mulesing must have the relevant knowledge, experience, and skills, or be under the direct supervision of a person who has the relevant knowledge, experience, and skills.

**S7.2** A person must not mules sheep that are less than 24 hours old or more than 12 months old.

**S7.3** A person must not mules sheep that are 6-12 months old without using appropriate pain relief.

**S7.4** A person must not mules sheep showing signs of debilitating disease, weakness or illthrift.

**S7.5** A person mulesing sheep must only remove wool-bearing skin.

Table – Mulesing

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G7.7 Mulesing should only be done where there are no alternatives and the procedure results in:* benefits to life-time sheep welfare
* better flock management
* a reduced work (occupational) health and safety risk.
 | Mulesing is a painful and stressful procedure for lambs and therefore should only be carried out if the mulesing process will be of such benefit to the overall health and welfare of the sheep. | (Add example) |
| G7.6 Where mulesing is performed, lambs should be mulesed at 2–12 weeks old. | Mulesing should be carried out between 2-12 weeks to provide protection against breech and tail strike as early as possible. If left until later, sheep may need to be crutched. Lambs younger than 2 weeks should not be mulesed as they are at a higher risk of infection and health implications. | (Add example) |

### Standards 8.1 to 8.3

**S8.1** A person performing artificial breeding procedures on sheep must have the relevant knowledge, experience, and skills, or be under the direct supervision of a person who has the relevant knowledge, experience, and skills.

**S8.2** A person performing artificial breeding procedures on sheep must not cause unreasonable pain, distress, or injury to sheep.

**S8.3** A person must be a veterinarian, or operating under veterinary supervision, to perform surgical embryo transfer and laparoscopic insemination of sheep.

Table – Breeding management

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G8.2 The timing and duration of the joining period should be managed to align with feed availability for the ewes and lambs, and to reduce weather risk for lambs. | Ewes in late pregnancy and ewes with lambs have a significantly higher feed requirement. For this reason, lambing should be aligned with when the most pasture/feed is available to ensure feed requirements are met. Lambing should also be timed to avoid periods of adverse weather conditions including high rainfall, snow, wind, and cold temperatures as this can lead to high lamb mortality rates. | (Add example) |
| G8.6 Lambing ewes should be placed in a sheltered paddock with quality feed, especially if there is a risk of cold, wet, or windy weather. | Animals rely on feed to regulate their body temperature and in cold, wet, or windy weather feed is essential for survival. Quality feed is also essential for lambing ewes to provide sufficient energy and nutrients to produce quality milk and support lambs. Lambing ewes require shelter, particularly in adverse weather conditions, to increase lamb survivability rates. Lambs can deteriorate and die in cold, wet, and windy conditions rapidly. | (Add example) |
| G8.7 Predators should be controlled before and during lambing. | The most common predators are foxes and wild/stray dogs. Predators can cause high mortality rates and injuries to both ewes and lambs if they are not controlled effectively. It is important to implement a control strategy prior to lambing to reduce predators and continue the strategy throughout lambing. | (Add example) |

### Standards 9.1 to 9.7

The standards requirements for this section can be found in detail on page 27 of the document at [Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep [PDF 1.2MB]](https://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au/sheep/).

Table – Intensive sheep production systems

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| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G9.14 Sheep should not be housed in single pens for any longer than is necessary. | Sheep are herd animals and seek safety from their flock. Sheep will become stressed if penned separately for an extended period of time. | (Add example) |
| G9.15 Wool biting and other stereotypic behaviours should be addressed. | Wool biting and stereotypic behaviours typically result from a lack of nutrition, lack of environmental enrichment, lack of forage/fibre, boredom, or unsuitability for intensive systems. | (Add example) |
| G9.23 Pen surfaces should be maintained to minimise slipping and injury. | Maintaining pen surfaces is important in order to prevent the sheep slipping. Slipping can cause injuries as well as trampling. This can result in foot and leg injuries. | (Add example) |

### Standards 10.1 to 10.6

The standards requirements for this section can be found in detail on page 32 of the document at [Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Sheep [PDF 1.2MB]](https://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au/sheep/).

Table – Humane killing

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Guideline | Reason | Example |
| G10.2 Three or more signs should be observed to determine whether the method used for humane killing has caused death. | It is absolutely essential to confirm a sheep's death following euthanasia in order to prevent undue or prolonged suffering. | (Add example) |