

# tips & tools

## LIVESTOCK EXPORT PROGRAM



## Preparation of sheep for live export

### Why I should consult this information?

For sheep to arrive overseas looking well and in good health, animals need to be prepared and processed correctly at every stage of the export chain — starting on-farm. We need to produce sheep that meet our customers' requirements.

All participants in the livestock export chain need to practice good animal welfare and abide by regulatory requirements for the benefit of the animals and the reputation and profitability of the livestock export industry. Failure to do so can result in legal action from regulatory authorities.

This Tips and Tools gives advice on scabby mouth vaccination and other methods to enhance the health and welfare of sheep during the live export process.

### When should I consult this information?

This is important information that applies whenever you are preparing sheep for live export, especially if you:

- depend on the live sheep trade for a significant part of your income;
- wish to avoid high mortality rates in sheep from your farm;
- want to ensure that we continue to meet international market requirements.

### Choosing sheep

Several factors predispose sheep to the Failure to Eat syndrome (FTE), the major ailment of the live export process. These factors include the property of origin;



the age and fatness of the sheep; and the time of the year. Young sheep grow quickly and therefore have strong appetites, which results in lower occurrences of FTE than in older sheep.

Note: Sheep have a reduced capacity to use stored body fat as an emergency source of energy in the second half of the year. This is when they would normally be laying down surplus energy from pasture as body fat reserves, and their metabolism is geared to this purpose.

Follow advice from exporters or their agents to ensure you are supplying sheep to specifications. By adhering to exporters' specifications such as age and fat score, sheep mortalities can be kept as low as possible.



## Market demands

For several years there has been a strong demand for younger, leaner sheep in the Middle East. This desire for younger animals has coincided with reduced availability of older sheep in Australia because of low returns from wool production and an increased interest in sheepmeat breeds.

## Scabby mouth and the live export trade

The Middle East market has sent a clear message that the prevalence and severity of scabby mouth in Australian sheep must remain low at destination. Scabby mouth has impacted significantly on the live sheep trade through rejections and subsequent worldwide publicity.

Scabby mouth disease is a common viral disease of sheep worldwide. In Australia, the majority of older sheep have been exposed to the disease and have developed immunity.

Conditions encountered during the livestock export process help the spread of scabby mouth. Large numbers of sheep mix closely during the assembly feedlot period and the sea journey, facilitating the spread of the virus. Sheep with scabs around the mouth are reluctant to eat and may lose weight during the voyage. Upon arrival, sheep with significant signs of scabby mouth are unacceptable.

For animal welfare reasons and to avoid the risk of rejection at destination, it is essential to ensure that sheep are vaccinated against scabby mouth

before entering the livestock export process. This will ensure they are immune when exposed to the virus subsequently.

## Vaccination against scabby mouth

There is no effective treatment for scabby mouth disease — but vaccination is a proven method of prevention. Scabby mouth vaccinations are a simple and relatively inexpensive method of ensuring that Australian sheep are free of this disease when they arrive at overseas ports. Scabby mouth vaccinations cost 22-26 cents per head and can be applied during marking.

## Application

- Scabby mouth vaccine contains live virus that is scratched onto bare skin, usually near the front leg or groin. A line of small scabs (or 'take') forms at the scratch site, but there are few other signs of the disease. The local reaction at the scratch site stimulates immunity.
- The vaccine is most easily and conveniently applied at marking by the producer, when the lambs are in a marking cradle and the bare skin near the front legs is exposed. Signs of a 'take' seven to 10 days later indicate that the vaccination has been effective.
- Protective immunity develops in about three weeks. On most farms a high level of immunity is maintained by natural exposure to scabby mouth virus.

- It is a requirement that sheep for export to Saudi Arabia are vaccinated on a second occasion and tagged by an accredited vaccinator at least five (5) clear days before entering the assembly feedlot.

### **The major benefits of vaccination include:**

- Protection against production losses from severe scabby mouth disease on-farm;
- Meets demands for low levels of scabby mouth in all Middle East markets;
- Required to supply Saudi Arabia.

### **Other issues**

Following public concerns and international media attention in 2003, the Australian Government imposed strict conditions on the livestock export industry. These conditions are contained in the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock and apply throughout the livestock export chain from livestock selection on the farm through to unloading at the destination country overseas. More information about the Standards can be found at: [www.daff.gov.au/animal-plant-health/welfare](http://www.daff.gov.au/animal-plant-health/welfare)

In addition, rising community expectations about animal welfare have resulted in closer scrutiny of livestock handling practices by State/Territory authorities to ensure compliance with animal welfare legislation. A breach of Australian or State/Territory legislation can result in significant penalties.

### **Final check**

Before loading export sheep at the farm, check that all sheep are appropriately identified and meet export contract specifications — correct sex, age, weight, wool and horn length, and scabby mouth vaccination status — and that all are fit to travel. Each sheep should be checked for signs of ill health or injury. Any sheep with scabs, pinkeye, scours, lameness, open wounds, excessive length horns or that is otherwise unfit to travel must be removed.

Any sheep that does not meet export contract specifications may be rejected at the assembly feedlot, at your expense. Under animal welfare legislation you are responsible, together with the truck driver, for any sheep that is loaded when it is not fit to travel.

Ensure that any required documentation is completed and signed, and accompanies the animals where appropriate.

### **Feed and water**

Sheep should be held off green feed for at least 12 hours before being transported to the assembly feedlot but not for extended periods beyond this. When sheep are held off green feed before loading, the floor of the stock crate is less slippery and there is less risk of injury in transit. Sheep also arrive cleaner and are easier to unload.

Ensure that any other feed or water withholding requirement, specified by the exporter, has been met.

### **Handling**

Sheep travel better if they are handled quietly with the least amount of stress. Keep the use of dogs to a minimum and either restrain or muzzle dogs that have a history of biting. Electric prodders should be used sparingly or not at all.



### **Loading and transport**

Ensure that the yards and loading facilities are suitable for the job and well maintained. The stock crate and truck should be well maintained, and the crate should be constructed to minimise injury and securely contain the sheep. Ensure that the loading density is appropriate.

Animals that have been transported to the assembly feedlot according to best practice will be less stressed and will adapt more easily to new conditions. The ramifications of poorly handled and transported sheep are felt throughout the chain. The time between loading on-farm and delivery to the feedlot should be kept to a minimum.



## Quality Assurance

Transporters are expected to have a Quality Assurance system in place such as Truckcare. In an effort to marry welfare concerns with the industry's desire for high-quality product, the Truckcare system has been developed for livestock transporters by the Australian Livestock Transporters Association (ALTA).

## The bottom line

Australia's producers have greatly increased their commitment to animal welfare and to ensuring that sheep for livestock export are well prepared, including vaccination against scabby mouth. The livestock export trade faces greater scrutiny, particularly regarding animal welfare. The future of the trade and Australia's reputation depends on all participants ensuring that community expectations for animal welfare and customer expectations for quality are met.

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## Checklist before animals leave property

### Before loading

- Yards and loading ramp are well maintained and suitable for use
- Feed curfew as specified by exporter
- Water curfew as specified by exporter
- All animals presented for loading are fit to travel
- All animals presented for loading are correctly identified
- Age, sex and weight of animals as specified by exporter
- Pregnancy status as specified by exporter
- Horn length appropriate (not more than one full curl for sheep) and blunt or as specified by exporter
- Health treatments (vaccination, medication etc) completed, as specified by exporter
- Health treatment withholding periods complied with (if applicable)
- Health status of property as specified by exporter (if applicable)

### After loading

- Stocking density is appropriate
- NVD/Waybill is completed, correct and legible
- Pre-export livestock declaration is completed, correct and legible
- On property protocol documentation attached
- If necessary, a travel plan may be needed to meet regulatory requirements



Level 1, 165 Walker Street  
North Sydney NSW 2060  
Ph: 02 9463 9333  
Fax: 02 9463 9393  
[www.mla.com.au](http://www.mla.com.au)

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