

Myths about tail docking

Tail docking in the dairy industry is largely based on habits, attitudes and tradition, rather than good science or real need. Increasingly, farmers are giving away the practice and discovering that cows with tails are just as easy to manage as those without.

The Australian dairy industry has a position that a person should only tail dock cattle under veterinary advice or to treat injury or disease. Instead the industry supports alternatives to tail docking such as switch trimming.

What is tail docking?

Tail docking is the removal (surgically or by other means) of any part of the tail. Tail docking of dairy cows is practised by a small proportion of dairy farmers in Victoria and Tasmania. It is prohibited in Queensland and South Australia and is rare in other states.

The future of tail docking

While the practice of tail docking is in decline, there are good reasons for it to be phased out completely, such as the risks to animal welfare, community disapproval and access to markets.

Animal welfare

Studies have indicated that tail docking of cattle by banding or hot docking iron results in mild acute pain (Phipps et al. 1995; Petrie et al. 1996). Surgical techniques carry more risks of infection and bleeding and can cause greater pain and distress (NAWAC 2005). There is no dispute that tail docking compromises the animal's ability to deal with biting flies. There can also be problems at the site of the amputation. Cows, like most mammals, have a tendency to develop a cluster of nerve cells (called a neuroma) at the site of an amputation. There is evidence that neuromas may develop in cows with docked tails, causing ongoing discomfort and pain (Eicher et al. 2000).

Impact on industry reputation and market access

Tail docking is illegal in many countries, including some of Australia's dairy trade partners and competitors, and has the potential to undermine public perception of the Australian dairy industry's animal welfare standards (Hemsworth & Coleman 2001).

Docking a cow's tail is permanent. It is usually practised on the herd's young replacements and so the docked cows will be in the herd for many years thereafter.

This is a risk to the business should a significant differential emerge in the value of docked cows compared to cows with tails. Even now, some breed societies cannot establish whether a cow is 'true to type' unless the tail is present.



An industry asset worth protecting

So why dock tails?

Farmers give many reasons for tail docking their cows. The most common are based on the perception tail docking:

- creates a more comfortable, safer and healthier operator working environment
- improves udder health by reducing the soiling of teats and udders - lowering cell counts and the prevalence of mastitis
- improves milk quality
- results in better milking performance.

However, scientific evidence from research into these areas does not support these claims (Tucker et al. 2001, Schreiner & Ruegg 2002). Furthermore, tail docking can cause short-term (and possibly long-term) pain. It also leads to a compromise of cattle welfare through increased levels of irritation from biting flies and increased efforts by cows to remove these flies (Phipps et al. 1995).

Myth 1: Tail docking creates a more comfortable, safer and healthier operator working environment

Operator comfort and safety is cited by farmers as the most important reason they continue to dock cows' tails. However, dairy farmers who do not dock tails use simple strategies to provide a comfortable working environment, as well as protect the welfare of the cow. These are outlined in the Alternatives to tail docking information sheet .

Some farmers also believe that there is a reduced risk of contracting Leptospirosis when tails are docked. Herd vaccination to stop cows shedding the bacteria is the only effective strategy to reduce this risk.

Myth 2. Tail docking improves udder health and milk quality

Some dairy farmers think that tail docking reduces mastitis, lowers somatic cell counts and improves the clinical health of cows. Several researchers have compared the udder health of docked and undocked cows. They found no evidence that tail docking improved the udder health of dairy cows.

Similarly, many dairy farmers believe that tail docking reduces faecal soiling of the udders and teats, and hence reduces the bacterial contamination of milk. Indeed, having cleaner teats and udders reduces the risk of contaminating milk. However, udder and teat cleanliness is very variable between individuals and not related to whether or not they have a tail.

Researchers identified factors such as shed design, laneway condition and management attitudes and practices to be the dominant influence on udder and teat cleanliness.

Myth 3. Tail docking improves milking performance

To date, no studies have specifically examined the impact of tail docking on milking efficiency. Research shows that milking productivity is largely affected by factors such as cow flow, milk-out time and the number of clusters available per operator. The additional time required to handle a problem tail is small. Good dairy design can usually remove the need for the operator to spend any time managing tails.

What are the alternatives?

Effective alternatives to tail docking are already used on most dairy farms. Switch trimming, dairy design, fly control programs and practices that enhance cow and operator comfort can effectively eliminate the hassle that tails may cause in the dairy.

References

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Further information

Stull, CL. Payne, MA. Berry, SL. & Hullinger, PJ. 2002: Evaluation of the scientific justification for tail docking in dairy cattle. *Journal of the American Veterinary Association* 220: 1298-1303.

Related tail docking fact sheets

Alternatives to tail docking
How to trim a cow's tail

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