

**National Organic Standards Board  
Livestock Committee  
Proposed Discussion Document**

**March 28, 2012**

**Guidance for Assessing Animal Welfare on Organic Sheep Operations**

The following is provided to aid in assessment of whether or not the requirements of § 205.238-241 are being met sufficiently to demonstrate adequate animal welfare conditions on organic sheep operations.

**Nutritional requirements**

**Body condition scoring of sheep**

Because wool covering makes visual examination of sheep body condition more difficult than with other species of livestock, body condition scoring may be helpful in determining whether the nutritional requirements of the ewe flock are being met and also in assessing the health status of sheep.

Estimated external fat cover is used as a base for estimating body condition. The fingertips are used to palpate fat cover over and around the vertebrae in the loin region. The best area to palpate is just behind the last rib. The spinal column has a vertical process at the midpoint of the back and a transverse process horizontal to the back and just below the loin. The prominence of these two points, or their lack of prominence due to fat cover, is helpful when estimating body condition. The recommended scoring system uses body condition scores ranging from 0 to 5. A condition score of 0 indicates extreme emaciation; a score of 5 represents excessive obesity. A condition score of 2.5-3 is considered as a medium fat-condition score for a healthy ewe at breeding and starting into the late gestation stage of pregnancy. If, within a “uniform” group or flock, several or more ewes differ from the majority in body condition score it may mean they are parasitized, diseased, aged (lacking teeth) or have other non-nutritional problems. As a rule, no more than 5% of the ewe flock should be below target body condition scores for the stage of production.

**Scoring:**

1. Feel for fullness of muscle and fat cover. (illustration)
2. Feel for the spine in the center of the sheep’s back behind the last rib and anterior to the hipbone. (illustration)
3. Feel for the tips of the transverse processes. (illustration)

**Target body condition scores based on stage of production**

Dry Ewe	1.5-2.0
Breeding	2.5-3.0
Early Gestation	2.0-2.5
Late Gestation*	2.5-3.0
Early Lactation*	3.0-3.5

## Late Lactation, Weaning 2.0-2.5

\*Add .5 to the target score for ewes expecting or nursing twins.

**Body Condition Score 0:** Sheep is extremely thin, unthrifty and weak. Skeletal features, such as backbone, shoulder blades and ribs, very prominent. Wasted muscle tissue evident. Eye socket is prominent and sunken. May be humped back and isolates self from flock (illustration)

**Body Condition Score 1:** Sheep is extremely thin, unthrifty but agile. Skeletal features are prominent with no fat cover. No apparent muscle tissue degeneration. Has strength to remain with the flock (illustration)

**Body Condition Score 2:** Sheep is thin but strong and thrifty with no apparent muscle structure wasting. No evident fat cover over the backbone, rum and ribs, but skeletal features do not protrude (illustration)

**Body Condition Score 3:** Sheep are thrifty with evidence of limited fat deposits in fore rib, over top of shoulder, backbone, and tail head. Hipbone remains visible (illustration)

**Body Condition Score 4:** Moderate fat deposits give the sheep a smooth external appearance over the shoulder, back, rump, and fore rib. Hipbone is not visible. Firm fat deposition becomes evident in brisket and around the tail head (illustration)

**Body Condition Score 5:** Sheep are extremely fat with the excess detectable over the shoulder, backbone, rump, and fore rib. Excess fat deposits in brisket, flank, and tail head regions lack firmness. Sheep appear uncomfortable and reluctant to move about. Quality fleeces are generally found (illustration)

### **Other areas of importance in providing adequate nutrition to sheep:**

- Sheep need to be provided with enough roughage in the diet to ensure proper rumen function. After weaning, 70% of daily dry matter fed should be long fiber roughage/forage.
- There should be sufficient access to forage when fed that all sheep have sufficient access to meet their nutritional requirements within 24 hours.
- If supplementary concentrates are fed, all animals in a group should be able to eat at the same time.
- Ewe lambs should not be bred unless they have reached 70% of their mature body weight. If ewe lambs are bred to lamb before they are 18 months of age, they may need to be fed separately from the ewe flock to ensure adequate nutrition during gestation.
- Lambs should not be weaned before 5 weeks of age. Early weaned lambs need a high-protein ration and should not be put on forage only.
- If culling does not remove older sheep with damaged or missing teeth from the flock, attention should be given to providing sufficient feed of a type these sheep can eat and digest.

## **Sheep health**

When managed in a pasture-based or range system as required by organic production, with attention to suitability of species, and selective breeding for desirable traits, sheep can require few health inputs, require little lambing intervention, operator- or veterinary-provided health treatment and yet display optimal health.

## **Internal parasites**

It is necessary for special attention to be given to managing internal parasites on organic sheep operations. If breed selection, pasture management, supplements and allowed treatments are not successful in keeping sheep parasite loads from impacting well-being, individual animals need to be given conventional treatments. Lambs are more susceptible to parasites than ewes.

## **Lameness**

Sheep hooves should be examined periodically or at least once yearly, and trimmed if necessary. 95% of the sheep should walk with no obvious limp. Animals with chronic or infrequent trimming management will be seen grazing on their knees and often will have grass stains on their knees. To simplify assessment, sheep can be classified as either lame or not lame. On a 5 point lameness scoring system, sheep that score as 3, 4, or 5 would be classified as lame.

**Score 1.** Completely normal walking

**Score 2.** No obvious limp, but may have slight gait abnormalities.

**Score 3.** All sheep that walk with an obvious limp. Sheep with a score 3 are able to keep up with their flock mates when the group is walking.

**Score 4.** All sheep that walk with an obvious limp and refuse to bear their full weight on one or more legs. Score 4 animals are not able to keep up with their flock mates when the group is walking.

**Score 5.** All sheep that have great difficulty walking. Score 5 sheep are barely able to walk.

## **Physical alterations**

Tail docking should only be done if needed for prevention of fly strike. When necessary, tail docking should be performed by suitably trained and competent individuals on lambs that are between 24 hours and 14 days old. Tails should not be docked shorter than the distal end of the caudal tail fold.

If castration is necessary to avoid breeding by ram lambs, banding should be done by suitably trained and competent individuals on lambs that are between 24 hours and no more than 30 days old.

## **Sheep living conditions**

Flocks may be managed with only natural shelter, depending upon climate, breed and lambing season. If sheep are housed or fed in lots, conditions should be such to maintain a cleanliness score of 1 or 2 for 95% of the flock.

## Cleanliness Scoring

Fleece maintenance is necessary to prevent manure from accumulating on the back end, rear legs and tail if present. The presence of manure in the fleece is an indicator of poor management that can lead to low conception rates and harbor external parasites. Messy rear ends may be due to washy forage growth or may be from untreated internal parasite loads. Excessive wool growth is problematic for newborn lambs to find the nipple and receive the valuable colostrum.

**Score 1.** The entire sheep is clean except its feet and lower half of the legs. Animals on lush green pastures may have some soiling of the rear legs.

**Score 2.** Both the upper and lower legs are soiled and the body/breast and sides are clean.

**Score 3.** Both the legs and belly are soiled.

**Score 4.** The legs, belly and sides of the body are soiled.

95% of the sheep should have a cleanliness score of 1 or 2.

## Space allowances

If sheep are confined in buildings or lots during the non-grazing season, the following minimum space allowances should be met. Because the standards require outdoor access for organic livestock unless weather conditions would be injurious to animal health, and because sheep tend towards respiratory difficulties when confined unless ventilation and moisture control is optimum, it is important that confinement of sheep to buildings be of a temporary nature—for treatment of illness, or shelter due to inclement weather, winter lambing or post-shearing—and that outdoor access be provided as soon as possible.

Livestock	Indoor Floor Space	Outdoor Space
<b>Sheep and goats (pounds)</b>	<b>Square feet / animal</b>	<b>Square feet / animal</b>
Sheep and Goats	16.0	30.0
Nursing lamb or kid	4.0	8.0

For ewes with lambs add 5 square feet for lambing percentages over 170%. Ewes lambing in confinement should be provided with a dry, bedded area for lambing and should be checked at least 3 times daily during lambing time for lambing difficulties or unclaimed lambs. Lambing jugs (pens) as small as 16 square feet in area may be used for up to three days for a ewe and her lamb(s) to separate them from the rest of the flock for a period of bonding and observation.

### **Pasturing sheep**

Important factors in managing sheep on pasture:

- Pastures need to be rotated and rested to minimize parasite infestation.
- Sheep need to be protected from predation.
- If electronet fencing is used, it should be kept properly energized.
- Sheep on pasture should be checked at least twice/day during lambing, once/day otherwise.

### **Humane handling of sheep**

Sheep should be handled quietly and firmly, with care taken to avoid unnecessary pain or distress. Sheep should not be caught by the fleece, or lifted or dragged by fleece, limbs, ears or tail. Electric prods should not be used on sheep.

### **Mortality rates in sheep production**

In assessing the level of animal welfare that is met on an organic sheep operation, mortality rates and causes should be examined and considered. Mortality in sheep production is generally looked at in terms of lamb mortality before and after weaning and ewe mortality.

Lamb mortality rates are impacted by the prolificacy of the ewe breed (multiple births=higher mortality rate) and lambing conditions. The primary causes of neonatal lamb death are starvation and hypothermia. A lamb survival rate of 95% at weaning is considered to be a goal by many sheep producers.

Similarly, a death loss of 5% or less in weaned lambs or ewes is considered to be indicative of good management. Weaned lambs in organic systems are impacted most greatly by parasites or predation. The mortality rate of ewes is affected by culling rate; if older ewes are kept on the farm, the mortality rate could be higher.

#### **Committee vote:**

Motion: Wendy                      Second: Colehour

Yes: 8      No: 0    Absent: 0      Abstain: 0      Recuse: 0