

How is a cow without a tail NOT like a fish without a bicycle?

If you Google “Why do cows have tails?” you come up with the anti-joke “Because my pet rock stopped breathing.” That adds a whole new dimension to the issue of tail docking in cattle—one that is perhaps out of the realm of animal welfare, so we will have to go with something a little more science-based.

Cows use their tails in three major ways—communication, locomotion, and fly removal (response to skin irritation). So the tail is not a useless appendage that should be removed in a cavalier fashion. These are behaviors that are important to the cow. If you are paying attention, you will find that a cow who is rapidly snapping her tail back and forth is angry, and that she will likely kick you. Not only do cows communicate with each other via the tail, they try to communicate with humans, too. Humans, however, sometimes do not listen.

Tails can be docked in a variety of ways. The use of an elastrator band is the most common, resulting in a short stump after one third to two thirds of the tail necroses and falls off. If the behavioral uses of the tail are ignored for a moment, there may be acute or chronic pain associated with tail docking—depending a bit on how one interprets pain or stress in cattle. While the effect of tail docking on communication and locomotion have not been examined, it is clear that cows with docked tails have more flies and more fly avoidance behaviors. We all know that flies are annoying.

Why do people dock tails? The practice of tail docking dairy cows originated in New Zealand, under the notion that docking tails prevented the spread of leptospirosis to milkers. Current evidence suggests that a cow's tail has little or nothing to do with leptospirosis in milkers, and tail docking is no longer a common procedure on New Zealand dairies. A variety of benefits have been ascribed to the practice of tail docking, including improved cleanliness, udder health, milk hygiene, milk production, and milker comfort (convenience). However, the science does not

support any of these claims. No differences were found in cow cleanliness, udder cleanliness, or somatic cell count. And, with regard to milker comfort, the simple practice of trimming the switch affectively addresses the inconvenience of a dirty tail. Although, cows with docked tails were cleaner right next to the base of the tail, no other area, including the udder, was cleaner in cows with docked tails. So, the science says that tail docking does not benefit the human, the cow, or the product—and may be harmful to the cow.

Denmark, Germany, Scotland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and some Australian states prohibit tail docking. The American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) position on tail docking is “AABP opposes the routine tail docking of cattle. Current scientific literature indicates that routine tail docking provides no benefit to the animal” (Approved by the AABP Board of Directors on March 13, 2010).

So why, if there is no documented benefit

to the cow, the milker or the product, and there is perhaps harm to the cow, do farmers continue to dock tails? When science does not support a practice, do we ignore the science for the sake of convenience? Or do we do the right thing and abandon the practice? Dr. Janice Swanson said in the *Michigan Dairy Review* (July 2009), “The insistence to continue a practice when it is ill-supported scientifically and by the veterinary medical community, casts doubt on the ethical bearings of an industry. Consequently, public confidence can be easily manipulated and eroded.”

I can't really answer the question of why farmers continue to dock tails in the face of science that says there is no benefit and may be harmful. However, I can give you one reason a farmer gave me for why he no longer docks tails: “We stopped docking tails when we started giving tours. We found we couldn't explain to the public why we did it, so we had to stop.”

There you have it folks: If you can't explain it simple, maybe you shouldn't be doing it.

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