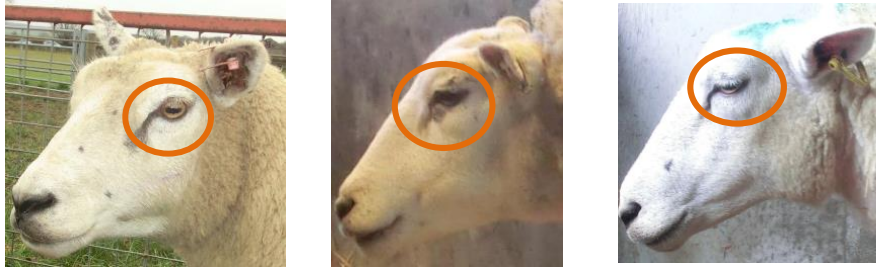# Sheep Pain Facial Expression Scale *

Orbital Tightening: When tightening is not present, the eye is round in shape. As the muscles around the eye tighten, they become more prominent and the eye starts to narrow. If the eye closes more than half way it should be scored as present.

Not present = 0   Partially Present = 1   Present = 2

Cheek Muscle Tightening: When tightening is present, the muscle that runs from the corner of the mouth area along the jaw line and up to the cheek bone is more prominent. There may also be tightening from the cheek towards the ear along the edge of the eye.

Not present = 0   Partially Present = 1   Present = 2

Abnormal Lip & Jaw Profile: Normally, the corner of the mouth is turned upwards slightly. The lips become flattened as tension increases, reducing the 'smile' like feature. The chin and jaw line are rounded in shape when tension is not present. The line becomes straighter and curved inwards (concave) when tightening is present.

Not present = 0   Partially Present = 1   Present = 2

Abnormal Nostril & Muzzle Shape: Normally, a shallow 'U' shape is present between the nostril openings. The surrounding muzzle follows this 'U' shape. As the position becomes abnormal, the area between the nostrils (and the surrounding muzzle) appears increasingly 'V' shaped.
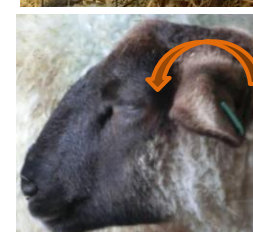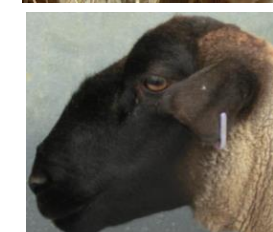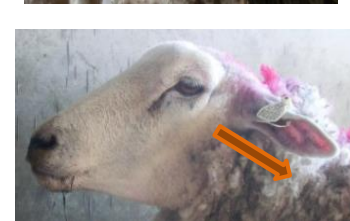

Not present = 0   Partially Present = 1   Present = 2

Abnormal Ear Position: Normally, ears are held erect and the inner part of the ear is visible when viewed from the front. As the position becomes abnormal, the ears drop and turn towards the face, so the inner part of the ear is not visible. The ear may be held in a backwards position. Normal ear position will differ depending on breed type; however, the changes that occur are the same for all breeds.

Not present = 0   Partially Present = 1   Present = 2

* See reverse for reference

Sheep Pain Facial Expression Scale (SPFES)

Animals experience pain as a result of disease, injury and some management procedures.

Why is it important to manage pain in livestock?

- Administering pain medication in combination with other treatments can speed healing time and lessen the drop in productivity due to disease or injury.

- It's the right thing to do. Handlers have a responsibility to ensure the well-being of animals in their care.

- Providing a high level of care to animals contributes to public acceptance of livestock farming.

The right thing to do, but…

It is often difficult to tell how much an animal is suffering. In some situations, outward signs of the injury or disease are obvious, but animals (particularly prey animals such as sheep) are stoic and frequently do not show overt signs of distress. Handlers may be unsure when the use of medications, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), is warranted. When medications are given, it may be difficult to assess how well they are working to relieve pain or resolve the problem.

A new tool for assessing pain:

Animals in pain do show reliable, if at times, very subtle signs of distress. A recently developed Sheep Pain Facial Expression Scale (SPFES) can help handlers accurately and objectively determine the degree of pain an animal is experiencing.* The SPFES was developed using animals with mastitis and foot rot, however, the expressions identified are common to other conditions that cause pain and distress in sheep.

* Development of a facial expression scale using footrot and mastitis as models of pain in sheep. Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci. 176 (2016); 19-26. Krista M. McLennan, Carlos J.B. Rebelo, Murray J. Corke, Mark A. Holmes, Matthew C. Leach, Fernando Constantino-Casas.
Available from: http://www.appliedanimalbehaviour.com/article/S0168-1591(16)00010-1/abstract

Contact Alberta Lamb Producers for more production resources (403-948-8533, info@ablamb.ca, www.ablamb.ca).

How to use the SPFES:

The scale is used to assess five facial areas for abnormal expression (see reverse for pictures and full descriptions);

- eyelids are closed or partially closed
- cheek muscles are tight and/or distended
- ears are rotated back and down
- lips and jaw profile is tightened
- upper lip is curled and nostrils are tightened

Abnormal expressions are assessed to be:

- 'not present' (scored as 0),
- 'partially present' (scored as 1),
- or 'present' (scored as 2).

Each area is scored separately with the total for the five areas combined for a 'total pain score'. The maximum possible score is 10 (i.e. the assessment of each facial area is scored as a '2'). The researchers who developed the SPFES considered a score of 5 or more to warrant the consideration of pain medication use.

Using the SPFES on-farm:

Observing facial expression is one tool that producers and handlers can use to determine the well-being of their animals. In a real life situation, facial expressions should be used in combination with other signs of disease or distress, such as body posture, lameness, increased vocalization, decreased appetite, or obvious injury. As changes in facial expression are likely common to all forms of distress, however, using the SPFES may be particularly useful in cases when more overt signs are absent.

The SPFES can also be used to determine when a treatment is effective in resolving disease or discomfort.

It is important to note that other factors, such as fear and stress, can affect facial expression and care should be taken to assess animals when they are calm.

Talk to your veterinarian if you have questions about the use of pain medication for sheep.

An interactive training tool is available at www.animalwelfarehub.com to help producers and handlers learn more about using the SPFES.

Growing Forward 2
A federal-provincial-territorial initiative

Alberta Government

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