

Australia's new definition of lamb

– what you need to know

JUNE 2019

What's changing?

The definition of lamb is changing in Australia.

The current definition of lamb is 'A female, castrate or entire male that has 0 permanent incisor teeth'.

The new definition is 'an ovine animal that:

- (a) is under 12 months of age; or
- (b) does not have any permanent incisor teeth in wear.'

This means a lamb is able to cut one or both of its permanent central incisor teeth, as long as they are not in wear.

Why is the change occurring?

The current definition gives producers no warning light about when a lamb stops being a lamb – the moment a permanent incisor erupts, the lamb is downgraded to hogget.

Rather, the new definition gives producers greater certainty and a definitive signal to make moves to market their lambs. Producers will have generally less than a month from the time of eruption to when permanent incisors are in wear.

The new definition is also consistent with New Zealand's definition – Australia's biggest lamb competitor in export markets. The change serves to even the playing field between the two countries.

Who initiated the change?

The change to the definition was first announced by Sheep Producers Australia in March 2018, following extensive consultation with producers and other industry stakeholders.

The change has been endorsed by the Australian Meat Industry Language and Standards Committee. Current members of the committee include the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Australian Meat Industry Council, Sheep Producers Australia, Cattle Council of Australia, Australian Lot Feeders' Association and the Retail Council of Australia.

When will the change take place?

The new definition will apply from 1 July 2019, once it has been changed in Australian export legislation and then in the legislation of NSW and WA.



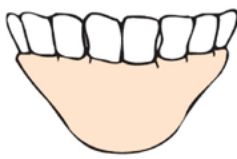
How do I apply the change?

The process for checking whether lambs comply with the new definition is via a visual inspection – the same process used to verify lambs against the current definition.

A permanent incisor is considered 'in wear' if:

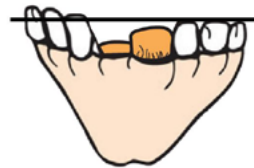
- it touches the upper pad when the sheep's mouth is closed
- it is above the height of the lamb's milk teeth either side of the permanent incisors.

No permanent incisors



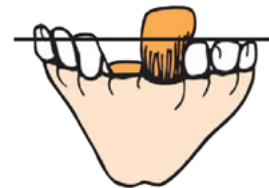
- ✓ current definition
- ✓ new definition

Permanent incisor not in wear



- ✗ current definition
- ✓ new definition

Permanent incisor in wear



- ✗ current definition
- ✗ new definition

How is eating quality affected under the new definition?

Eating quality has been at the centre of the decision about whether to change the current definition of lamb.

A more major change to the lamb definition (for example, where two fully erupted permanent incisor teeth are in wear) was not pursued by the industry because of the risk of consumers having an unsatisfactory eating experience.

In contrast, research has shown that lamb under the new definition was as acceptable to consumers as lamb under the current definition. Peer-reviewed research¹ (Wiese et al. 2005) found that a minor change to the definition of lamb – such as one or two permanent incisors having erupted but not being in wear – produced no discernible difference in eating quality compared with lambs with only milk teeth.

How will the new definition affect the variability of lamb quality?

It's true that lambs under the new definition can be slightly older than the case now. But under the new definition, the length of time a lamb is considered a lamb could be extended by less than a month².

If customers desire young lambs, they can request a category that already exists in the AUS-MEAT Language that accounts for lambs without permanent incisors – YOUNG LAMB (YL).

More information

Visit www.sheepproducers.com.au/lamb-definition

¹ Wiese, S.C., Pethick, D.W., Milton J. T. B., Davidson R.H., McIntyre B. L., D'Souza, D. N. (2005) *Effect of teeth eruption on growth performance and meat quality in young sheep*, Australian Journal of Experimental Agriculture, 45, 509-515.

² approximately 30 days, according to Holmes Sacket (2018), *Assessment of the economic impact on stakeholders and industry from extending the lamb definition*, p. 4