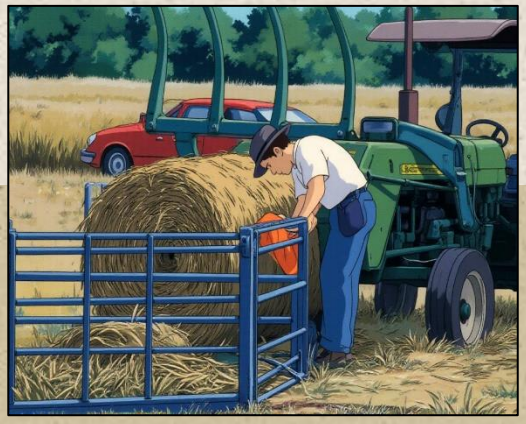
# Is it necessary to dock lambs' tails?

It depends. Lambs' tails are docked (shortened) to prevent fecal matter from accumulating on their tails and backsides, which could attract flies and result in flystrike (maggots). It also keeps them cleaner. The show ring requires it. However, sheep have tails for a reason, docking is a painful procedure, and there are alternatives that some producers may wish to consider.


There are breeds that do not require docking (or crutching): hair sheep (e.g., Katahdin, St. Croix) and sheep with rat (e.g., Finn, Romanov, East Friesian, Icelandic), or fat (e.g., Awassi, Karakul) tails. Hair sheep and hair x wool crosses now make up 27 percent of the US sheep population.

Dagging, also known as crutching, is when you clip the dirty wet wool from around the sheep's tail and rear end. This will prevent flystrike, too.



Providing dry forages (such as hay) to sheep grazing lush pastures can slow down grass digestion and help solidify the feces. Limiting grain consumption may also help.

Controlling internal parasites will help to prevent loose feces, since several of the parasites that commonly affect sheep cause scours (diarrhea).

If you decide to dock your lambs, do it right. Do it when lambs are young (ideally < 1 week). Use appropriate tools and techniques. Don't dock tails too short (or long). Provide pain mitigation, if possible.

Tail length is highly heritable, and the tail length of a lamb is intermediate between its parents. Researchers have tried to breed sheep with no tails, but it has led to problems. Crossbreeding with short tailed sheep is a better option.

By Susan Schoenian, Sheep & Goat Specialist Emeritus, University of Maryland Extension. For more information, go to.
https://agreenerworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TAFS-2-Management-to-Avoid-Tail-Docking-Sheep-v1.pdf 