The aim of this study was to describe common sheep management according to a survey of farmers in Southern Brazil and their impact on sheep welfare. Forty-nine sheep farmers in Southern Brazil were willing to participate on a survey from September to November 2017. In this study we considered 12 questions and data collection methods were by paper and online. Some questions were not answered by all farmers because respondents could choose to skip questions or quit participation at any point. Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Sheep farming was not the main activity at the farm (79%) (37/47) and this may suggest that resources were not prioritized for sheep. Almost all of the farmers (98%) (45/46) kept the flock exclusively on pasture, in an extensive system. This condition is positive for sheep natural behavior; however, it implies an exposure to environmental challenges and requires attention. For example, lamb postnatal mortality ranged from 2 to 50% (mean=16%) and the main causes of lamb mortality given by farmers were predators (62%) (28/45), which is facilitated by environmental exposure; and hypothermia (20%) (9/45). Lamb hypothermia is connected with poor ewe nutrition and it is a welfare problem. The majority of sheep welfare threats due to management were related to pain. When asked about castration, 62% of farmers answered it was performed before lambs were one month of age (29/45); however, some farmers responded it occurred when lambs were one to six month of age (15%) (7/45), which is worse because of the greater magnitude of pain in the older lambs. Most farmers claimed that tail docking occurred on males and females (53%) (24/45) and 29% of farmers (13/45) made tail docking just on females. Tail docking is a painful procedure; it is unnecessary for males and presents fragile scientific support for females. Forty-six percent of farmers (18/39) alleged myiasis occurrence due to tail docking on less than 5% of animals and 33% (13/39) farmers argued that it did not occur. Castration and tail docking were carried at the same time by 82% (37/45) of farmers, performed without anesthetic use by 95% (42/44) of farmers. Both procedures cause acute pain when carried without pain control and these situations are forbidden by the Federal Veterinary Council and may be considered a criminal offense by Brazilian Law 9.605/1998. Our results indicate that the common sheep management procedures mentioned by farmers represent a relevant impact on sheep welfare.

Keywords: Lamb, sheep farmers, sheep welfare

Acknowledgments: To Science Forensic Program of CAPES