



LIVESTOCK WELFARE COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Established 1978

Livestock Welfare Coordinating Committee
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POSITION STATEMENT

DEHORNING CATTLE: ACCEPTED AND ILLEGAL METHODS

Dehorning of cattle may be justified in terms of prevention of goring, bruising and even killing other cattle. However, dehorning must be done using the right method, the right equipment, to the right class of animal and at the right time of year, by operators who are correctly trained, know the risks and how to minimise them, and conduct the right follow-up procedures.

All farmers must note that only the disbudding and then cauterisation of young calves is accepted as a dehorning practice for use by farmers. The dehorning of adult cattle by saws, hacksaws, axes, keystone instruments, embryotomy wires or other methods is forbidden, and any such practices will lead to prosecution under the Animals Protection Act. Adult horned cattle must be dehorned by a veterinarian, using adequate anaesthesia.

Dehorning by caustic agents poses a serious risk of damage to other parts of the body if the agent is not strictly confined to the horn. The caustic substance may run down from the point of application and damage eyes, ears and face. Rain and moisture may aid this spread and increase the risk. Animals may rub the treated area against objects or even other cattle and thus cause further damage. Using this method implies that only very young calves with small horn buds can be dehorned. For these reasons, using caustic substances is not the recommended method of dehorning. In spite of its own limitations and risks, dehorning by hot iron after disbudding remains the preferred method on the grounds of animal welfare.

Castration rings, also known as elastrators, were developed for castration and accepted for this purpose subject to strict limitations governing application and age of animal. These devices are not acceptable for dehorning cattle since they cause prolonged pain and result in the necrosis (death) of the horn, underlying tissues and bone. This in turn renders the animal susceptible to serious infections, including gangrene. If dehorning is to be done by farmers, it must be performed on young

calves only and using methods approved by Industry Codes of Best Practice. It is rational and preferable to breed cattle without horns (Polled cattle), since the polled gene can readily be introduced into any breed and constitutes a permanent, painless way of obviating the need to practice dehorning.

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