



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet - Removing horns in domestic cattle C1

Update August 2005

Mutilations or removing parts of animals is one of the most common issues raised by animal welfare groups. Disbudding (removal of horn buds in young cattle) or dehorning (the removal of the horn in older cattle) is carried out frequently for the purpose of protecting other cattle and stockmen from harm.

'.... the facts.

Disbudding is mainly carried out using a hot iron and growing horns are removed by cutting. This is time consuming for stockmen and requires, often quite strong, restraint of the animal. An alternative technique involves application of a caustic paste to the horn bud to prevent its growth.

Disbudding and dehorning are painful procedures and under UK law this process has to be carried out using local anaesthetic.¹ Caustic paste may be used within the first week of life without anaesthetic.¹

It is often not possible to anaesthetise the horn area with 100% effectiveness. This is because there are often two nerves supplying this region. The procedure, for some calves at least, will be distressing and cause pain.

Concerns with caustic paste relate to pain in the bud area and the risk of paste running down the calf's face or irritating the cow's udder.

Some cattle are naturally born without horns (polled). Most domesticated cattle do not require horns to protect themselves.

Some breeds of cattle we use for food production are easier to breed polled than others. For example all commercial dairy cattle have horns and polling is rare but many beef breeds are naturally polled. There is concern amongst some stockmen that polled animals will be inferior to horned animals in terms of their commercial traits but with the use of objective selection this need not be the case.



Disbudding a calf using caustery paste after clipping hair

'.... the FAI response!

The short term strategy at FAI is to use Hornex caustic paste at a day or so of age when calves are tagged. The process is quick and simple (see above) and assessment of pain suggests that this technique is less painful than hot iron disbudding. The technique can also be carried out easily in the field.

Caustic paste is effective as long as the hair is well clipped and a moderate amount of paste is applied covering the whole bud area and rubbed well in. There has been no evidence that the paste runs and irritates the calves' eyes or the cows' udder provided the procedure is carried out in dry conditions. In wet conditions the paste would not be effective and we have observed weather forecasts closely during calving. There have been no problems putting calves back with their dams after a few minutes as happens when this procedure is carried out in the field (calves are placed in a link box for stockman protection as seen above).

The better and longer term strategy is to breed only polled stock and this process is now well underway. Commercial data from our polled calves has shown that there is no discernable difference in growth rates and the quality of the finished animal compared to our horned cattle.



Calf, three days after caustery paste application

1. Code of Recommendation for Cattle Welfare
www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/farmed/cattle/pb0074 or phone 08459 556000 for PB 0074



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