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FVE & EAPHM position on preventing tail docking and tail biting

The Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) and the European Association of Porcine Health Management (EAPMH) recognize that **pigs are sentient** beings capable of pain and suffering, deserving of consideration and respect.

The veterinary profession believes we should **move away from mutilations such as tail docking** and generally work towards the improvement of pig welfare in commercial farming conditions.

It is essential for every pig farm to receive at least monthly, depending on the risk level, a **veterinary visit** by the pig veterinarian or veterinary practice with whom the farm has a contract. **Veterinarians have a key role** to play to **assess the risks for tail biting** and to **advise farmers** on setting up an **effective action plan**, tailored to that particular farm, with solutions to prevent tail biting and to phase out in the longer-term the need for tail docking.

The market should **promote high health and welfare pig farming** and value the production of pigs without tail docking. To ensure a level playing field between EU and third country production, when stopping tail docking in the EU, the EU should also stop the importation of tail-docked pigs or pig meat from countries that allow tail docking.

Problem statement:

The vast majority of piglets in Europe are tail docked, namely the removal of a large part of the tail, to reduce the likelihood of tail biting in later life.

Tail biting events can be triggered by a **wide range of factors**, often in combination, including for example:

- lack of appropriate and sufficient enrichment materials which doesn't meet the pigs' needs for exploration and chewing, causing frustration, boredom and stress
- excessively high stocking densities causing e.g. increased competition for resources, social challenges with a lack of opportunities to escape dominant animals and increased risk for pen fouling
- health and disease problems
- feed and drinking water deficiencies with increased competition for these resources
- environmental problems such as air flow and draughts at pig height, fluctuating light exposure and temperature levels causing thermal discomfort and inadequate ventilation allowing high levels of dust and noxious gases (i.e. ammonia)
- genetic disposition and breeding practices



Tail biting, when it occurs, is a significant health and welfare problem which can give rise to pain and suffering in the affected pigs, formation of secondary abscesses in the pig following infection, an increased risk of other health problems (e.g. joint infections, pneumonia) and substantial economic losses.

Even though docking has been proved to lower the risk of tail biting, it is not always effective. **Tail docking has the disadvantages of:**

- impairing the physical integrity of the pigs
- being a painful procedure, as shown by specific behavioural and physiologic indicators
- removing the tail which is an important animal-based welfare indicator
- facilitating suboptimal production methods from a welfare point of view

For these reasons the routine tail docking of pigs has been **forbidden in the European Union** since 1994. Despite this, most piglets at this moment in the EU are still tail docked.

To move away from routine tail docking needs new ways of farming pigs and a change in mentality amongst farmers, advisors, authorities and veterinarians. In many countries in the EU, pig farmers and pig veterinarians have little to no experience with raising pigs with intact tails.

When evaluating the costs and benefits of tail docking, it is important to consider negative impacts of both tail docking and tail biting. Nevertheless, science and practice in several European countries (e.g. Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland) have shown that it is possible to rear pigs with intact tails in commercial pig farming systems.

Role of the veterinary profession:

As a veterinary profession, with a mission to promote animal health, animal welfare and public health, we have the responsibility and obligation to reduce welfare problems. Moving away from tail docking is part of this. In most countries, the farmer decides ultimately on whether or not to implement farming practices to prevent tail biting and whether or not to tail dock. However, **veterinarians have an important role** to play by **identifying risk factors** for tail biting and **advising farmers** on changes in husbandry and management to reduce the risk. The veterinary profession should also **actively participate in the public debate** about the welfare issues with tail docking and tail biting and how they can be prevented. In all countries that have phased out routine tail docking, the veterinary profession played an important role in making this possible.

Although not required by the Pig Directive (2008/120/EC), some countriesⁱ or farm assurance schemes only allow farmers to tail dock pigs after a veterinarian has issued a **veterinary certificate**. Veterinary certificates should always follow the FVE 10 principles of certification¹. Tail docking, according to the Pig Directive is only allowed with evidence of tail biting following appropriate and sufficient enrichment material being present and after verification that the farmer has made corrective changes e.g. housing, climate, diet or stocking density. When all these conditions are fulfilled, the veterinarian can write the certificate, according to the rules of certification, to allow tail docking for a **defined time period** and for a **defined group** of pigs.

¹ FVE 10 principles of certification: <https://www.fve.org/publications/fve-10-principles-of-veterinary-certification/>



Recommendations for consideration:

- Animal husbandry and management should allow for a good quality of life for pigs and respect the 5 freedoms². Animals shall be kept in environments with which they can fulfil their physiological and ethological needs, be free from avoidable and unnecessary suffering i.e. be able to express important behaviours and not suffer from frustration and boredom. In general, the **environment should be designed to fit the needs of animals**, not the other way around.
- All pigs (weaners, fatteners, finishers, gilts, sows and boars) shall have **permanent access to a sufficient quantity of suitable enrichment material** to enable proper investigation and manipulation activities, such as straw, hay, etc. Enrichment materials should enable pigs to fulfil their innate needs to look for food (edible materials), bite (chewable materials), root (investigable materials) and manipulate (manipulable materials) as defined in the EC staff working document³.
- Pigs shall have **permanent access to fresh, clean water** and be provided **high-quality feed**. It shall be provided in such a manner that all pigs in the pen or group are able to satisfy their needs without undue competition between pigs.
- Mixing of pigs should be avoided as much as possible.
- Keeping pigs with an intact tail has a cost in respect to the need of providing enrichment materials, lower stocking densities and for effective management to ensure risk assessment and early detection of tail biting. However, the same preventive measures also have the potential to improve animal health, leading to increased growth and reduced costs for medical treatments and lowered mortality rates.
- The veterinary profession should advocate for **societal-level funding support** for improved pig health and welfare, for example –
 - by retailers and other supply chain actors paying a fair price and to reward high health and welfare practices;
 - by guiding citizens to assurance schemes (where available) that improve farm animal health and welfare. Veterinarians need to be in a centrally placed role for such assurances.
 - by lobbying governments and authorities to recognise farm animal health and welfare as a public good to be allocated public funding support.

² Farm Animal Welfare Council, the National Archives; 2012. [(accessed on 5 February 2016)]. Available online: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121010012427/http://www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm>

³ European Union. Commission staff working document on best practices with a view to the prevention of routine tail-docking and the provision of enrichment materials to pigs. SWD(2016) 49 final. https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/animals/docs/aw_practice_farm_pigs_stfwrkdoc_en.pdf.



In addition, the European Commission should deny funding animal welfare payments (individual farms or marketing of produce) to farmers that do not comply with the prohibition on routine tail-docking of pigs.

- **Veterinarians** have an important role to play **to promote the keeping of pigs with intact tails**. This includes **identifying the risk factors** for tail biting and **advising farmers** on changes in husbandry and management to reduce the risk. **Every farm needs a tailor-made risk assessment** and its own action plan targeted with defined timelines and aimed at gradually phasing out tail docking. Due to the multi-factorial nature, usually addressing several risk factors will be needed.
- It is essential for every farm to have a **contract with one pig veterinarian**, or one veterinary practice that regularly deals with pigs, who **visits the farm at least every month**, depending on the risk level. This allows for good team work between the farmer, veterinarian and other animal-related professionals. It also allows the farm veterinarian to have detailed inside knowledge of the farm, in order to be able to identify the areas in which disease prevention, welfare, biosecurity and farm efficiency can be improved. It also allows to better train new staff (especially in farms with a high staff turn-over) and to support the farmer.
- **Monitoring of tail lesions on farm**, preferably by a harmonized scoring system across member states, is essential for risk assessment and the decision towards changes in management and on phasing out tail docking. Records should be kept of pigs euthanised with severe tail lesions.
- **All slaughterhouses should collect data** in a systematic way, on the percentage of pigs having been tail docked and the percentages with tail biting lesions in both docked and undocked pigs. This data should be made available for the authorities, the farmer and the farm veterinarian.
- **Thresholds** for acceptable levels of tail biting lesions should be defined to allow farmers to set targets for their action plans and to support decision making to phase out tail docking.
- A **harmonised EU scoring system** should be developed on the severity of lesions noted and used. Results should be openly published annually at national level.
- **National action plans** to prevent tail biting and tail docking **are pivotal**. They need to address requirements set by the EU Commission and should incorporate the following considerations:
 - To be effective they should be developed in **close collaboration** with both the national pig veterinary practitioners and the pig industry in the country.
 - The **exchange of knowledge** between producers, veterinarians, researchers and administrators should be improved.
 - They should include **support for veterinary practitioners**, through giving them the necessary training materials and the authority to promote change.
 - They should include **awareness raising** campaigns.



- They should include **monitoring of tail biting and tail docking**, and the development of materials and guidance on the severity of lesions.
 - They should **include how tail-bitten pigs should be kept and treated**, e.g. giving analgesia (NSAIDs) to tail-bitten pigs.
 - They should promote that the **market supports and values** the production of pigs with intact tails, for example through farm assurance schemes. In the transition stage to a complete stop of tail docking, there should be room for the farmers to join market schemes promoting intact tails that provides financial support in order to change their method of production.
 - It is highly unlikely that it will ever be possible to completely eradicate tail biting. Addressing all known risk factors for tail biting is essential. It still may be necessary in case of an outbreak or a significant problem to tail dock. Tail docking in such cases should be allowed for a restricted time for a defined group of pigs and upon taking actions to rectify the situation. In these situations, tail docking should be seen as a temporary solution, with the intent to determine underlying cause and work to a more permanent and sustainable resolution.
- It would be greatly beneficial to **set up an 'advisory body' to support pig veterinarians** into helping farmers to make this change, e.g. in connection to the EC pig reference centre. For example, a multi-country practitioner's group could be established who have successfully moved farms towards raising pigs with intact tails and who are willing to support other veterinarians with technical advice around changing husbandry, housing and feeding. This group could also help in collecting research data (in real farming conditions) and to distribute results of scientific research amongst practitioners.
 - Veterinary certification, as required in some countries, can play a role in specific cases but should only be provided upon fulfilment of clearly specified animal welfare-focused criteria that are based on proper investigations and hence clearly verifiable by the veterinarian and the authorities and in line with the FVE 10 principles of certification. The development of objective tools to support veterinarians to verify the specific criteria (e.g. a definition for 'evidence of tail biting') would be beneficial. Certification should only allow tail docking for a defined time period and for a defined group of pigs.
 - To ensure a level playing field between EU and third country production, when stopping tail docking in the EU, the EU should also **stop the importation of tail-docked pigs** or pig meat from countries that allow tail docking.

FVE CALLS UPON:

FVE and EAPHM members to work together with the national competent authorities within their country to promote the establishment and implementation of a system in line with the above recommendations.