

## Tail Docking of Dairy Cows – Scientific Justification

**John H. Kirk, DVM, MPVM**

Extension Veterinarian

School of Veterinary Medicine

University of California Davis

Tulare, CA 93274

Many dairies in California and other states have adopted the practice of removing a large part of the tails from their dairy cows. This is commonly called tail docking. On a large proportion of these dairies, the cows are milked from the rear in rotary or parallel parlors where the milkers reach through or past the tail to gain access to the udder and teats. On these dairies, the benefits of tail docking are thought to be improved comfort for milkers and enhanced udder and milk hygiene. A recent paper by Stull, Payne, Berry and Hullinger in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* (220:1298-1303, 2002) explored the scientific literature in an attempt to determine the extent to which these benefits were justified.

Their literature review found a recent study where the effect of tail docking on cow cleanliness was examined. In this study of about 400 cows housed in free stalls, 4 measures of cow cleanliness, 2 measures of udder cleanliness and udder health (somatic cell counts) were considered. No significant differences were noted in the study measures between the docked and undocked cows during the 8 week study. In other studies with smaller numbers of cows, some improvement in cleanliness was noted on the bodies of the cows but not the udders. Other studies noting improvements in cleanliness suggested that the improvements likely resulted from less manure being deposited on the legs in the housing areas rather than the tails. It seems from these studies that cleanliness in housing areas has more to do with udder and teat cleanliness than does tail docking.

A New Zealand study examined tail contacts with milkers involving docked, switch-trimmed or normal tailed cows being milked from the rear in a rotary parlor. Contact of tails on the milkers' arms caused by the cows swishing their tails occurred less than once in every 10 milkings. In undocked cows, tails contacted the milkers' faces about once in 1000 to 1500 milkings. The milkers were noted to move normal tails away from the milking machine more often than they did with switch-trimmed cows. In another paper on milker comfort, the authors suggested that properly installed butt plates on milking equipment designed for milking from the rear will reduce interference by the tail during milking.

Another concern explored by Stull and co-authors was the risk of Leptospirosis in milkers. As Leptospirosis can be spread through the urine and can penetrate broken or abraded skin and even intact mucous membranes of the eye or mouth, the concern is that it might be spread by urine soaked tails of cows to the milkers. One study examined the association of tail docking in cows and blood titers to Leptospirosis in milkers. Positive blood titers to Leptospirosis would indicate enough exposure to case the milker's immune systems to respond. In this study, positive titers for Leptospirosis were not found to be

related to tail docking. This study suggested that in herds with persistence Leptospirosis infections there is sufficient exposure to cause human infections regardless of the presence or absence of tails. In herds where there is concern about human infections resulting from exposure to cattle, routine vaccination of cattle for Leptospirosis has been shown to greatly reduce the occurrence of human infections.

The authors of the literature review concluded that the available data do not support claims that tail docking improves the dairy worker's comfort or safety or reduces the risk of Leptospirosis. They suggest that tail docking be discouraged until scientific evidence emerges that supports the notion that tail docking has benefits for animal health, well-being or public health.

Stull CL, Payne MA, Berry SL and Hullinger PJ. Evaluation of the scientific justification for tail docking in dairy cattle. JAVMA 220(9); 1298-1303, 2002.

Docking tails.doc  
8/16/02