Sheep welfare in stud and meat farms in South Brazil using the Animal Welfare Indicators protocol

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Considering the lack of information about sheep welfare in Brazil, our objective was to assess ewe welfare in stud (S) and meat (M) farms. Seven S and 10 M farms were assessed during spring 2015, in Southern Brazil, using the Animal Welfare Indicators (AWIN) protocol for sheep, which has four welfare principles: good feeding, good housing, good health and appropriate behaviour. Total number of ewes was 164 in S and 267 in M farms. Results were compared with Mann-Whitney test at 0.05, and are presented as median (min-max) values, in the order S followed by M; AWIN indicator names are marked in italic. No differences were observed for indicators within good feeding and appropriate behaviour principles, including social isolation, stereotypies, excessive itching, familiar human approach test and Qualitative Behaviour Assessment. Overall, 6.9 (0.0-21.9)% of evaluated ewes were emaciated and the automatic drinker was not functioning in one M farm. There were differences within good housing principle, in the category fleece clean and dry with 74.2 (9.4-96.9)% vs 4.7 (0.0-73.9)%; and within good health principle, categories some fleece loss with 4.2 (0.0-45.8)% vs 17.3 (3.1-78.9)%; soiling and dags with 0.0 (0.0-0.0)% vs 17.4 (0.0-44.8)% and minor lesions 8.4 (3.1-27.6)% vs 0.0 (0.0-13.0)%; these differences probably relate to different shearing schedules (twice vs once a year) and to differences in breed (28.6 vs 90% of predominantly wool-blood). Head lesions were observed in 3.4 (0.0-8.3) vs 10.4 (0.0-26.3)%, probably due to tears caused by ear tagging, less common in S (50%) than in M (80%) farms. Indicators that seemed to restrict welfare but did not differ between groups were hoof overgrowth in 44.8 (11.5-75.0)% and tail docking 95.5 (3.4-100)%. We were able to identify main welfare restrictions in both stud and meat farms; overall welfare seems higher in stud farms due to fleece characteristics and shearing practices.