

Preservation of Raw Sheepskins

Introduction

The Real Sheepskin Association (RSA) has enabled funded research into the best practice for optimizing the value of sheepskins destined for use as wool on, added-value, by-product sales. The work is supported by Defra and Leader+, following collective work on the interpretation of ABPR 2003 that affected many smallholders, Hide Markets and Tanners. The British Leather Confederation (BLC) was contracted to produce a report. Copies are available from Leader+ (see appendices).

Recommended Procedures - particularly for small quantity preservation:

1. **Day 1** - sheepskins must receive the first treatment on the same day as slaughter, preferably within 4 hours.
2. Transfer to separate premises is allowed under Defra regulations but, if untreated, must be within the same day (to farm, tanner or hide market).
3. Skins should be laid out on a clean non ferrous surface, flesh upwards, allowing blood fluids to drain into an absorbent or collecting area for disposal.
4. Applications of first salting must be applied to the flesh side, using approx. 1 Kg of PDV Salt, covering all fresh, raw surfaces. Don't trim skins on farm (Defra)
5. Abattoirs may offer a light salting service to provide temporary intermediate treatment - do NOT assume this is all that is needed!!!
6. **Day 2** - the second treatment must be carried out on time, up to 1 Kg of PDV Salt will be needed depending on size and wetness of the skins.
7. PDV salt mixed with 2% Boric acid is recommended, particularly for long term preservation and warm ambient conditions. The RSA can be consulted regarding supply of the salt mix.
8. When skins have finished draining (day 3 onwards) they can be sent to the tannery - secure packaging if commercial forwarding agents plus Defra approved movement certificates - for website.

Detailed information is available from the Tanner members featured on the RSA website membership page - see appendices

Summary of the BLC's findings

9. Current Hide Market and Sheepskin Tannery practice, including 2 applications of PDV Salt, is only satisfactory within limited conditions and shelf life.
10. Warm, humid storage will encourage degradation on the flesh side of the skins, Red Heat (a halophilic bacterium) develops rapidly where the skins are stored flesh to flesh - (anaerobic). This is 'probably' a precursor to woolslip.
11. The mechanism of woolslip developing during the preservation cycle is not fully understood and requires considerably more research.
12. Application of acids or alkalis inhibit bacterial growth. Alkali is not recommended as excess Soda Ash can lead to woolslip (a fellmongering procedure).
13. Boric acid mixed with salt does have a disinfecting role but is too weak to provide a simple pH test for control and does not reach the maintained concentrations required by Defra to kill viruses (less than pH 6.0).
14. Ultra-violet radiation, coupled with acid or alkali, significantly inhibits bacterial growth. It is predicted that, applied on the same day as slaughter, woolslip will also be inhibited. This has still to be confirmed by examination of the stored test samples.

Appendices

Defra: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/by-prods/othertopics/hides-skins>

RSA: <http://www.realsheepskin.org.uk>, (Leader+, BLC)

RSA Members Page: http://www.realsheepskin.org.uk/our_members