

British Association for Shooting and Conservation  
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Perthshire  
PH8 0DY

Franck David  
Clerk, Public Petitions Committee  
The Scottish Parliament

24<sup>th</sup> September 2010

Dear Franck,

**Petition PE 1230**

**Risk Factors for Tail Injuries in Dogs in Great Britain – A Response to Advocates for Animals**

Thank you for your invitation to respond to the submission by Advocates for Animals on the Royal Veterinary College and Bristol University study, and the paper published in the Veterinary Record. I am more than happy to provide the following comments as the named Petitioner of Petition 1230, calling for the reintroduction of prophylactic tail docking for working gundogs in Scotland.

The Veterinary Record paper completes a trilogy of studies that are now available to the Committee, each one having its own methodology and each one reaching broadly similar conclusions in support of prophylactic tail docking.

The Veterinary Record paper (Diesel *et al.*, 2010) took a broad brush approach that covered Great Britain and dogs of all breeds. Despite this approach the conclusion was made that “*Dogs with docked tails were significantly less likely to sustain a tail injury*” and that springer spaniels and cocker spaniels were among the breeds of dogs deemed to be in a high risk category. In addition, the Discussion concludes that “*In the present study, the results of the additional models for spaniels and for working dogs only also showed tail docking to be an important factor in reducing the likelihood of a dog sustaining a tail injury.*” However, the paper then “drifted” away from the study’s aim “*to ascertain the extent to which docking reduces the risk of tail injury*” by bizarrely considering tail docking as a possible procedure for all dogs. These points are the ones that Advocates for Animals then utilise and indeed exaggerate.

To illustrate this, the paper contained what has become a headline-grabbing statement that “*approximately 500 dogs would need to be docked in order to prevent one tail injury*”. This appears to be based upon the overall “*weighted risk (of injury) for Great Britain*” and therefore covers all dogs of all breeds. Petition 1230 does not call for the possibility of dogs of all breeds in Great Britain to be docked as puppies. It does not even refer to dogs of all breeds traditionally docked in Great Britain and it does not seek to include greyhounds, lurchers or whippets, as suggested by Advocates for

Animals. (Some, possibly the majority of these dogs that were traditionally docked, were docked for cosmetic purposes. Petition 1230 does not refer to cosmetic docking.) Petition 1230 only refers to the prophylactic tail docking of working dogs in Scotland under tightly specified circumstances and therefore the reference to 500 dogs is incredibly misleading. This figure also relates only to the risk per animal per year, whereas prophylactic tail docking delivers protection throughout the lifetime of the animal. Hence even the *500 dogs* figure should be scaled downwards by a factor approximately equal to the average lifetime of a dog, and not scaled upwards, as suggested by Advocates for Animals.

In addition, the authors themselves recognise other weaknesses in their work. For example, “*The study was started approximately one year after the introduction of the new legislation, and therefore it may be too soon to detect differences in the risks of tail injury due to the differences in legislation.*” and “*Due to the random sampling and selection of veterinary practices, only a small number of working dogs were included in the study.*”

The above point is also of considerable relevance to the introductory paragraphs of the Advocates for Animals submission. Here they state that in 2009 many vets had not seen an increase in tail injuries since the introduction of the tail-docking ban in Scotland. In both cases questions were asked too soon after the ban was introduced and before undocked puppies of working gun dogs had started to work. The more recent study analysed by McKendrick (2010) avoided the weaknesses that Diesel *et al* (2010) identified.

An earlier study by Houlton (2008) took a more focussed look at the question of injury to a much narrower set of dogs – gundogs in Great Britain. Even though this study had been carried out three years before Diesel *et al* (2010), and suffered from the same problem in that there was a relatively small number of undocked dogs in the sample of 431 spaniels, there was still a highly significant association between undocked dogs and tail injuries. Both of these peer-reviewed papers have therefore made the same statistically significant association between tail length and propensity to injury, and referred to the need for more detailed study. In fact, Houlton (2008) stated that “*it should be possible in future to identify greater numbers of undocked Spaniels and compare groups of more similar size.*” This is what happened in 2008/2009 in an independent study carried out in Scotland.

Working Dog Injury Survey Analysis (McKendrick, 2010) considered a total of 319 working gundogs, predominantly spaniels and featured a representative group of undocked dogs that had started to work as gundogs. This study identified strong statistically significant evidence that working dogs belonging to the springer and cocker breeds have a higher risk of injury associated with longer tails. A similar effect was observed for Hunt Point and Retrieve breeds, but that effect was not formally statistically significant.

Specifically, this effect could be quantified as saying that the odds of a cocker spaniel in this population having an injury increased by a factor of 2.4 for every extra inch of tail length and the odds of a springer spaniel in this population having an injury increased by a factor of 13 for every extra inch of tail length.

In conclusion, the paper by Diesel *et al* (2010) confirms that dogs with docked tails were significantly less likely to sustain a tail injury and that docking appeared to be an important factor in reducing the likelihood of a dog sustaining a tail injury. The figures given, and referred to by Advocates for Animals, that quantify the size of any risk and any prophylactic effect are uninformative since they are derived from a much wider population of dogs which are exposed to very different types and levels of risk. The study only featured a small number of working dogs and it may have been carried out too early to detect the real impact of the restrictive legislation in Scotland. Houlton (2008) had also shown this relationship in a smaller but more focussed study, but the clearest statistically significant findings came from the study analysed by McKendrick (2010). This latter study had the advantage of being able to analyse the impact of the introduction of the ban on tail docking in Scotland in 2007 when undocked dogs, such as spaniels, were recruited into the working gundog population. All three studies are relevant to the issue of prophylactic tail docking of working gundogs in Scotland and all three studies provide clear, supporting evidence.

While this may appear at odds with the comments provided by Advocates for Animals it is based upon a thorough understanding of the current situation surrounding working gun dogs, and the clear benefits that a small but valued, and valuable, group of working dogs derive from prophylactic tail docking. Advocates for Animals illustrate in their response their own misunderstanding of this petition, and probably of the study that they were commenting on, when they refer to the “loss of a tail through docking”. Prophylactic docking, as applied to spaniels, is the shortening of the tail by a veterinary surgeon through the removal of a small section of the tail tip. This confers protection to the tail of the dog when adult, by which time the tail could be about 10” long. Clearly, this is not the “loss of a tail”.

The only time that the removal of the whole tail is required is when it is amputated due to recurrent tail-tip injuries. These injuries are now proven to be associated with undocked working gun dogs, hence the need for prophylactic docking to confer life-long protection to these dogs.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Colin B. Shedden  
Director, Scotland

### **References:**

Diesel, G., Pfeiffer, D., Crispin, S. & Brodbelt, D. (2010) Risk factors for tail injuries in dogs in Great Britain. *Veterinary Record* 166, 812-817.

Houlton, J.E. (2008) A survey of gundog lameness and injuries in Great Britain in the shooting seasons 2005/06 and 2006/07. *Veterinary and Comparative Orthopaedics and Traumatology* 21, 231-237.

McKendrick, I. (2010) Working dog injury survey analysis. *Biomathematics & Statistics Scotland*, Edinburgh.