



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Animal Health Section

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Understanding Euthanasia on the Farm

G. W. Brumbaugh, DVM; J. J. England, DVM; and C. A. Hinds, DVM
Caine Veterinary Teaching Center, University of Idaho, Caldwell

“Euthanasia” is derived from the Greek terms “eu,” meaning “good,” and “thanatos,” meaning “death.” A “good death” is essential to the humane termination of an animal’s life and should be considered seriously. Veterinarians may perform the euthanasia, supervise personnel who are trained to perform euthanasia, or train designated individuals to perform euthanasia. Training of personnel to properly perform euthanasia should include safety for personnel, proper techniques, minimization of distress to the animal being euthanatized, regulatory requirements, verification that the animal is deceased, proper disposal of the animal’s body, and biosecurity for the farm.

Adherence to protocols for euthanasia is as important as adherence to protocols for other animal care activities. The duty of the veterinarian or trained personnel performing euthanasia includes that person’s disposition to induce death in a manner that considers the animal’s interest and/or well-being and the use of techniques that induce death rapidly, painlessly, and as distress-free as possible.

Decisions Regarding Euthanasia

Humane behavior reflects the desire to do what is best for the animal and serves to bring about the best possible outcome for the animal. Euthanasia meets the description of humane behavior when death is a welcome event and when the owner and the veterinarian determine that continued existence is not an attractive option for the animal. Euthanasia may be the compassionate choice of treatment when death would not be worse than living. When the animal no longer functions well, displays behaviors that are innate to the species, or is suffering, euthanasia may be the humane decision.

When the decision has been made to perform euthanasia, the goal is to minimize pain, distress, and adverse effects to the animal. Ethically, when the animal’s life is

to be taken, it should be done with respect for the interests of the animal and performed as humanely as possible. Complete absence of pain and distress cannot always be achieved. Attempts should be made to minimize pain and distress within the reality of the diverse environments in which euthanasia is performed.

The finality of death is, in part, what makes it an ethically important issue. Death eliminates future opportunities for improvement and eliminates suffering that may be associated with progressively deteriorating conditions.

Acceptable Methods of Euthanasia for Cattle

Acceptable methods of euthanasia consistently produce a humane death when used alone. *Methods acceptable with conditions* are techniques that require certain conditions to be met in order to consistently produce humane death. Personnel who perform euthanasia must be proficient in the safe use of the chosen technique. Understanding of the normal behavior of the animal species to be euthanatized and experience with proper restraint of the animal species is also expected. Euthanasia should only be performed when the necessary supplies are available and in accordance with applicable federal, state, and local laws.

An acceptable method of euthanasia should induce unconsciousness, should minimize pain and distress, and should result in loss of life-supporting function of the brain, heart, and lungs. Unconsciousness is defined as the loss of individual awareness and occurs when the brain does not integrate information. It is observed in animals as the loss of the righting-reflex or inability to maintain an upright (sternal) position while lying. Uncoordinated movement of limbs may occur when the animal is unconscious.