

The Elephant in the Room: End of Life Decisions for Cows on Your Farm

Dr. Dan Shock

If you have livestock, you have deadstock. Everyone that dedicates their lives to working with livestock fully understands this saying. But death and euthanasia can often be the “elephant in the room”. We pour our hearts and souls into giving our livestock the best life possible, so it’s understandable that the conversation of death is not a comfortable one to have. But we owe it to our animals and ourselves to have a pre-determined, evidence-based plan to ensure that, when the time comes, we give our animals the most humane possible death with minimal suffering.

First off, there is a LOT to be proud of in the Canadian dairy industry. We have taken a leadership position in the world by implementing the proAction program. Case in point - everyone reading this should have a standard operating procedure for euthanasia on their farm. This achievement is tremendous and needs to be recognized.

Recently, however, I was involved in a study that looked at death rates and euthanasia practices on Canadian dairy farms ^[1]. The good: most producers were following recommended practices for euthanasia. The concerning: the level of unassisted death rates may indicate that the decision to euthanize is not made soon enough. Further, there was a small proportion of producers using blunt force trauma for euthanasia, especially in bull calves. For this reason, it is important to review the euthanasia practices that should be in place on every farm.

Have A Plan and Stick To It

Euthanasia is the ending of the life of an animal that is suffering or has an incurable ailment in a way that minimizes or eliminates pain or distress ^[2]. In order to get to the decision to euthanize, you need to have a well-developed evaluation system in place to identify animals that have a low likelihood of recovering. Your veterinarian has the training and experience to help you devise an assessment protocol to look at things like: how likely is this animal to recover? Is this animal in incurable pain or distress? Can they get to feed and water? How productive are they likely to be? What type of diagnostic information could help us decide? In order to minimize animal suffering, animals in hopeless situations must be promptly euthanized – it is not acceptable to allow these animals to suffer and die unassisted.

Know Your Acceptable Methods of Euthanasia

Once you have identified that an animal should be euthanized, it is imperative that a trained individual perform the procedure using one of the acceptable methods for euthanasia. The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle (<https://www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice/dairy-cattle>) outlines the only acceptable methods for euthanasia as:

- Free bullet (.22 caliber for calves, .22 magnum or high-powered rifle for mature heifers, cows and bulls).
- Penetrating captive bolt - followed by pithing, bleeding, or cardiac puncture.
- Non-penetrating captive bolt - followed by bleeding (not for adult cattle).
- Injection with barbiturates and other drugs (administered by a licensed veterinarian).

Training Is Key

Your veterinarian can provide the training you need in the technique that best suits your farm. Anyone performing euthanasia on farm should be trained by a professional – and this includes on-going training and assessment to ensure procedural compliance. Many farmers prefer having their veterinarians perform euthanasia, and this is perfectly acceptable.

Confirm the Animal is Deceased

After the animal has been euthanized, it is vital to ensure that they are truly dead. There are three areas to assess after an animal has been euthanized:

- Evaluate consciousness by touching the eyeball. If the animal has been rendered unconscious, there will be no blinking.
- Evaluate the animal for a lack of heartbeat by placing a stethoscope behind their elbow and listening.
- Look for a lack of respiration by assessing the rise and fall of the chest.

Animals should not be left unattended or moved until all signs of life are gone.

The “Caring and Killing” Paradox

We are all devoted to ensuring that the animals in our care have the best lives possible. It is hard to consider killing an animal for whom we have worked so hard. The necessity of euthanasia can bring about considerable physical, psychological, and emotional distress. Dr. Jan Shearer calls this the “caring and killing” paradox ^[2]. Given these effects, it can be easy to delay or avoid euthanasia. It’s important to recognize that the act of euthanasia can be stressful for all involved. To minimize this, it is imperative to have a plan and set of procedures in place for animals requiring euthanasia. It is also imperative that we all take care of our mental wellness – resources such as the Canadian Mental Health Association’s “Mental Health in the Agriculture Industry” (<https://ontario.cmha.ca/farmersmentalhealth/>) are there to ensure that we can all better cope with the variety of stressors in our professional lives.

As an industry, we have come a long way in identifying these situations and applying the appropriate methods to ensure a timely, painless death. Make sure you are addressing that elephant in the room - work with your veterinarian to ensure you have the protocols and training in place to identify and humanely euthanize any animal experiencing uncontrollable pain and suffering.

References

- [1] S. M. Roche, R. Genore, D. L. Renaud, D. A. Shock, C. Bauman, S. Croyle, H. W. Barkema, J. Dubuc, G. P. Keefe and D. F. Kelton, "Short communication: Describing mortality and euthanasia practices on Canadian dairy farms," *Journal of Dairy Science*, vol. 103, no. 4, pp. 3599-3605, 14 2020.
- [2] J. K. Shearer, *Euthanasia of cattle: Practical considerations and application*, vol. 8, MDPI AG, 2018.
- [3] NFACC, "Code of practice for the care and handling of dairy cattle," 2009.