

Animal welfare aspects of dealing with Euthanasia

Every person who raises livestock must sometimes deal with having to put an animal down.

On a larger farm, say a pig barn housing 1,000 or more sows, even a low mortality rate of one per cent or less means staff will have to deal almost daily with animals that become sick or injured. That will include piglets born prematurely or with unmanageable birth defects.

It is essential for the welfare of the animals themselves as well as that of the people caring for them that those animals be dispatched in as humane a manner as possible, Winnipeg veterinarian Claude Mason told the annual conference of Alberta Farm Animal Care in Red Deer on March 24.

In livestock production, euthanasia means giving an animal that is suffering a quick and quiet death with the least possible chance or pain or trauma, Mason told a crowd of more than 150 people, including livestock producers and fellow veterinarians.

There are people who do it right, and there are horror stories. Getting it right is a matter of respect not just for the animals, but also for the emotional health of the people working with them, he said.

"Sometimes I have failed to recognize what the people need, and what I need to input as a veterinarian to help those people feel better. There is a tremendous impact on people and they won't admit it."

People who invest time and energy into raising healthy animals are often extremely reluctant to put one down, even though attempting to keep it alive may increase its suffering while biting into the farm's profitability, said Mason.

"I found that I was in a position that I had to help with this decision-making process."

He identified a variety of factors that will produce either a positive or a negative impact on both livestock and handlers.

Euthanasia failure occurs when the method chosen misses the mark, due to either an equipment malfunction or human error. Mason cited an example of a worker in a hog barn whose favoured method for dispatching piglets was to crush them under his heel. "What do your co-workers think about it and how to you feel? I mention it because it happens."

Complaints of failure in a CO2 chamber occur when people do not understand how the gas works. Used properly, the chamber provides a quick and painless death for smaller animals. Improperly administered, the gas will cause the piglet to thrash around and become ill, suffering a prolonged and agonizing death.

Modified nail guns are messy and will splatter brain matter and blood through an area, spreading pathogens that endanger both people and livestock.

A handler's inability to locate the right position for a rifle shot or captive bolt gun will result in further distress to all parties involved. Despite the various conformations of pigs' skulls, people responsible for putting animals down will get it right every time if they are taught the proper location for a kill shot.

Cleaning up splatter and blood trails is essential to keep infections from spreading and because the sight of a pool of blood can have a strong emotional effect on people and animals.

While some animal technicians may demand access to Euthanyl, the drug is available only to licensed veterinarians, making it impractical in a commercial barn. Additionally, residues of Euthanyl in the carcass make it unsafe for consumption, so Euthanyl cannot be used in animals that will be processed for pet or livestock feed.

Barn operators need to ensure that guns are properly stored and carefully maintained. A .22 calibre rifle or a captive bolt gun can be highly effective when used properly, but both carry severe risks if misused.

Mason related the story of a farmer who had attempted to dispatch a



large boar with his .22. The farmer missed his mark and the bullet ricocheted off the boar's skull, hitting him in the face. "I had the opportunity to sell him a captive bolt gun that day."

Mason advises producers to train all their staff in the farm's euthanasia protocol and that barn operators post their standards of practice on a wall where they are easy to read. "Stick it on the wall of the room where the euthanasia will be performed. It reduces the amount of time they will spend on the disasters I've pointed out."

Owners and managers need to be supportive of their staff. Mason recounted the story of a barn worker whose absentee manager stated that pigs could be killed on Mondays and Fridays only, forcing him to let the animals suffer for days when they should have been dispatched quickly, which caused high levels of distress for the worker.

Overall, Mason recommended that barn managers set up their euthanasia program in a way that recognizes the welfare of their animals and the people working with them.

"I feel that if people fare poorly in their attitude to making animal welfare better, then their animals fare poorly as well."

Mason was honoured at the 2006 Banff Pork conference in January for his role in developing a method for injecting sows that is safe and comfortable for both the animals and their handlers.

Alberta Farm Animal Care is a non-profit organization supported by various producer groups and government agencies to promote humane practices in livestock production. •

— By Brenda Kossowan
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