

ON-FARM EUTHANASIA DECISION MAKING

Should They Stay or Should They Go?

One of the realities of livestock

production is on-farm euthanasia. All farmers face situations where animals, because of disease, injury or some other cause, must be humanely killed on-farm.

Dr. Terry Whiting, Manitoba Agriculture and Rural Initiatives, has been encouraging producers to establish a decision-making process to facilitate timely and humane on-farm killing. “Everyone has ‘punk’ animals and no one wants them. It costs money when decisions to cull on-farm are too late or delayed excessively.”

According to Dr. Whiting producers should identify critical control points that help them make the right decision at the right time. For example:

- Decide when to stop treating an animal if it is not responding (e.g., 14 days);
- Decide upon a point past which, if an animal is not meeting target requirements (e.g., weight), it is to be culled;
- Downers should automatically be killed on-farm.

“We need to kill unfit animals in a timely manner. Producers are responsible for ensuring animal welfare on the farm.” There are **six barriers to humane killing**, says Dr. Whiting:

- Faint hope of the animal recovering;
- Ignorance;
- Lack of empowerment (e.g., staff in larger systems);
- Lack of training and equipment;
- Shirking of duty (repugnance of killing);
- ‘Moral Food Conviction’ — an abhorrence of wasting an animal for use as food.

The technical details, or ‘how to’, of humane killing are well documented. However, operations standards (the when to, why to and who to) are less clear.

Dr. Whiting suggests **six operational criteria for on-farm euthanasia decision-making**.

1. Humane killing must be regarded as a standard veterinary treatment choice.
2. Clear decision trigger points need to be set.
3. Employees must be empowered to make euthanasia decisions.
4. Proper procedures, training and equipment must be available.
5. All involved must believe in the necessity and painlessness of euthanasia.
6. Ongoing evaluations are needed to ensure animal welfare is maintained.



“Producers and staff must believe it is the moral high road to euthanize in a timely manner. **We need to see what the animal is feeling to make a faith based decision on when an animal needs to be killed,**” says Dr. Whiting.

Prompt killing is sometimes the best decision. Larger operations would need a manual outlining specific directions for required outcomes - clear instructions with an expectation that standards are adhered to. “Make the hard decisions once, write them down, and follow through,” says Whiting. ■

ACTIVE EUTHANASIA PLAN PAYS

Financial and welfare implications of immediately euthanizing compromised nursery pigs, Journal of Swine Health and Production, Volume 14, Number 1

The findings of Dr. W.E. Morgan Morrow, et al included:

- Some categories of compromised pigs (weak, lame [2 or more swollen joints, lame on at least one leg], and hernias) are associated with higher mortality levels, and thus should be euthanized immediately for humane and economic reasons.
- Pigs with prolapses, weakness, lameness, or two or more conditions endure poor welfare while providing very little financial value. Euthanizing such animals would improve the overall herd welfare, with minimal costs.
- The costs associated with caring for compromised animals (feed, medication, staff) can reduce their value considerably. Adding in the welfare costs to the animal makes the immediate euthanasia of some compromised animals a viable and humane option.

The article is available at www.aasv.org.