

Decision-Making for Down Cattle to Ensure Good Animal Welfare



Quick intervention is key when it comes to down cattle, as early and appropriate management decisions can lead to an improved chance of recovery.

Have a Plan

proAction® requires that farmers provide prompt treatment to sick and injured cattle, have a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for managing down cows, have a separate area for housing sick and injured animals, and have developed an SOP for humane euthanasia. When developing your down cow SOP, it is important to include how animals should be managed, how they should be moved, and where they should be housed for recovery, but also consider: factors that might impact decisions to either proceed with treatment and nursing care, or opt for humane euthanasia.

Making a Decision

Here are some questions to consider to help you identify when efforts to help an animal are no longer effective and efforts should be directed to humane and timely euthanasia:



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4. Did the animal go down in an area that is easily accessible for humane movement?



No — consider euthanasia. It may cause more stress and pain to move this animal, compromising both human and animal safety

Yes

5. Are there any broken bones visible?



Yes —

- Consider euthanasia. Large animals are unlikely to recover from injuries such as a dislocated hip, broken limb, broken back, or broken pelvis. These animals are in pain
- Young calves may experience broken bones after a difficult calving. In the event of a broken limb, apply a splint and call your veterinarian. They can examine the limb and apply a cast if necessary

No — move the animal to an area that is conducive to its recovery, as per your SOP, and proceed with treatment and care as recommended by your veterinarian. If no improvement is noted after ~24 hours, contact your veterinarian for further instruction

After Treatment and Nursing Care:

Have you given appropriate treatments (glycol, calcium, antimicrobial therapy, pain control etc.) as recommended by your veterinarian?

- If an animal does not show signs of improvement or respond to the treatments recommended by your veterinarian after ~24 hours, it may be necessary to consider euthanasia to relieve pain and suffering
- If an animal shows signs of improvement with the administration of pain control and treatments, continue providing feed, water, comfortable bedding, supportive therapy and nursing care, and assistance standing until they are well enough to stand on their own and return to the herd

Is the animal interested in eating and drinking?

- If an animal is not interested in eating or drinking ~24 hours after treatment and nursing care, euthanasia should be considered as their condition may be deteriorating

- If an animal shows signs of interest in eating and drinking, be sure to provide ample fresh feed and water in a bowl or pail that cannot be tipped, and keep within reach at all times. Calves should be encouraged to drink and may need assistance with a bottle. **Do not tube milk to calves that will not drink as this can cause fermentation resulting in acidosis in the rumen. Calves that cannot stand should not be tubed any fluids (milk or electrolytes) as there is a risk of fluids being deposited into the lungs**

Is the animal only able to lie flat out?

- If an animal cannot maintain a sternal lying position ~24 hours after treatment and nursing care, euthanasia should be considered as their condition may be deteriorating



An animal's chances of recovery are reduced every hour it is down.

When Should You Consider Euthanasia?

A quick response is key: identifying why an animal went down can help to facilitate timely treatments for the best chances of recovery, but knowing when a down animal is unlikely to recover and requires euthanasia is of equal importance. These animals will benefit from relief of their pain and suffering through euthanasia.

Euthanasia Does Not Mean Failure

While euthanasia is a difficult decision to make, there are situations when it is appropriate, respectable, and a good animal welfare practice. **It should not be considered a sign of failure or poor management.** To relieve their pain and stress is a demonstration of compassion and can often be the best decision you make on their behalf.

Training is Key

It is extremely important that staff involved in euthanasia of cattle on your farm are trained in making timely decisions, using appropriate methods, are familiar with the farm's SOPs, and are competent in their ability to properly manage a down cow. They should also have the ability to contact the herd veterinarian for immediate assistance if required. There should always be designated personnel present on the farm (or quickly available) that are trained to end an animal's life in the event of an emergency.

Resources

For more information on performing euthanasia and approved methods:

[The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle: Section 6 Euthanasia](#)

[Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs: On-Farm Euthanasia of Cattle and Calves](#)



Work With Your Veterinarian

Your veterinarian is an excellent resource for developing down cattle management strategies and treatment protocols, as well as assisting with decision-making for down cattle. Consider including them in your SOP development, and utilize them to assist with decision-making. They are also well-equipped to humanely euthanize animals and/or provide training to you and your designated staff to ensure this procedure is being performed appropriately.



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