



Best practice farms prioritise the health and welfare of animals at the end of their productive life by keeping them safe, comfortable, and medicated to alleviate pain. Euthanasia should be implemented swiftly and humanely by a veterinarian or an authorised and qualified person whenever an animal cannot be saved or slaughtered.

Why is this important?

Euthanasia is important to provide a swift and humane end to an animal's life where treatment is not viable and/ or pain cannot be sufficiently alleviated. Most cows suffering other incurable diseases are culled. Some animals may continue their life in a productive manner as calves fattened for beef, or reduced yield cows becoming foster dams to support calf rearing.

Good practice

The proposed practices to guide decision-making around the 'end of career' for cows are also applicable to other life stages.

Pain, health and welfare surveillance

- ✓ Every animal (irrespective of age) on the farm must be observed frequently. If animals experiencing acute pain or suffering are identified, farm personnel must take immediate remedial action, such as calling for veterinary assistance and/or administration of pain relief prescribed by a vet.
- ✓ Farm personnel must be trained to promptly recognise animals experiencing acute pain and suffering, as well as assessing the animal's fitness for transport.
- ✓ Use of pain assessment scales should be considered in this "triage" process (see **Table 1**).

Signs	PAIN LEVELS				
	No pain	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Very severe
General signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content and quiet • Grazing or eating at feeder • Curious about surroundings • Moves away when approached • Normal interaction with herd and calf (if a cow) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mild posture change • Stiff or subtle lameness • Less interested in surroundings • May warn off herd mates by head shaking or bunting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Away from herd • Quiet, dull eyes • Abnormal posture-stiff, not moving, arched back, lame • Rough hair coat • Decreased appetite • Calf at foot may be hungry or bawling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Away from herd • Stiff, unwilling to move • Not eating • Unkempt appearance • Weight loss • Abnormal posture-head down, tucked tail, arched back, ears down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid shallow respirations • Open mouth breathing • bulging eyes • Depressed • Grunting • Teeth grinding • Not eating • Rigid posture or down
Reaction to palpation of affected site	Animal not bothered by palpation anywhere	Animal may or may not react to palpation of an affected site (wound, swelling, injury, surgical site etc): pull away, kick, vocalize	Animal reacts to palpation may try to run away or act aggressive when handled	Animal moves away from palpation may kick or bellow or be rigid	Animal is rigid or unresponsive

Table 1. Animal signs associated with pain levels (adapted from IVAPM and Care4Dairy resources on assessment of pain in cattle, De Boyer & Ledoux 2023)



- ✓ Animals with mild or moderate signs of pain may be treated on the farm, using licensed medications prescribed by a veterinarian. The details relating to every case of pain relief administered should be recorded in the farm records such as animal/ tag number, reason for pain relief requirement, drug, dosage and frequency given. These animals should be closely monitored until the condition either resolves completely or if it continues or deteriorates veterinary intervention may be required or the decision taken to end the life of the animal (see **Figure 1**).

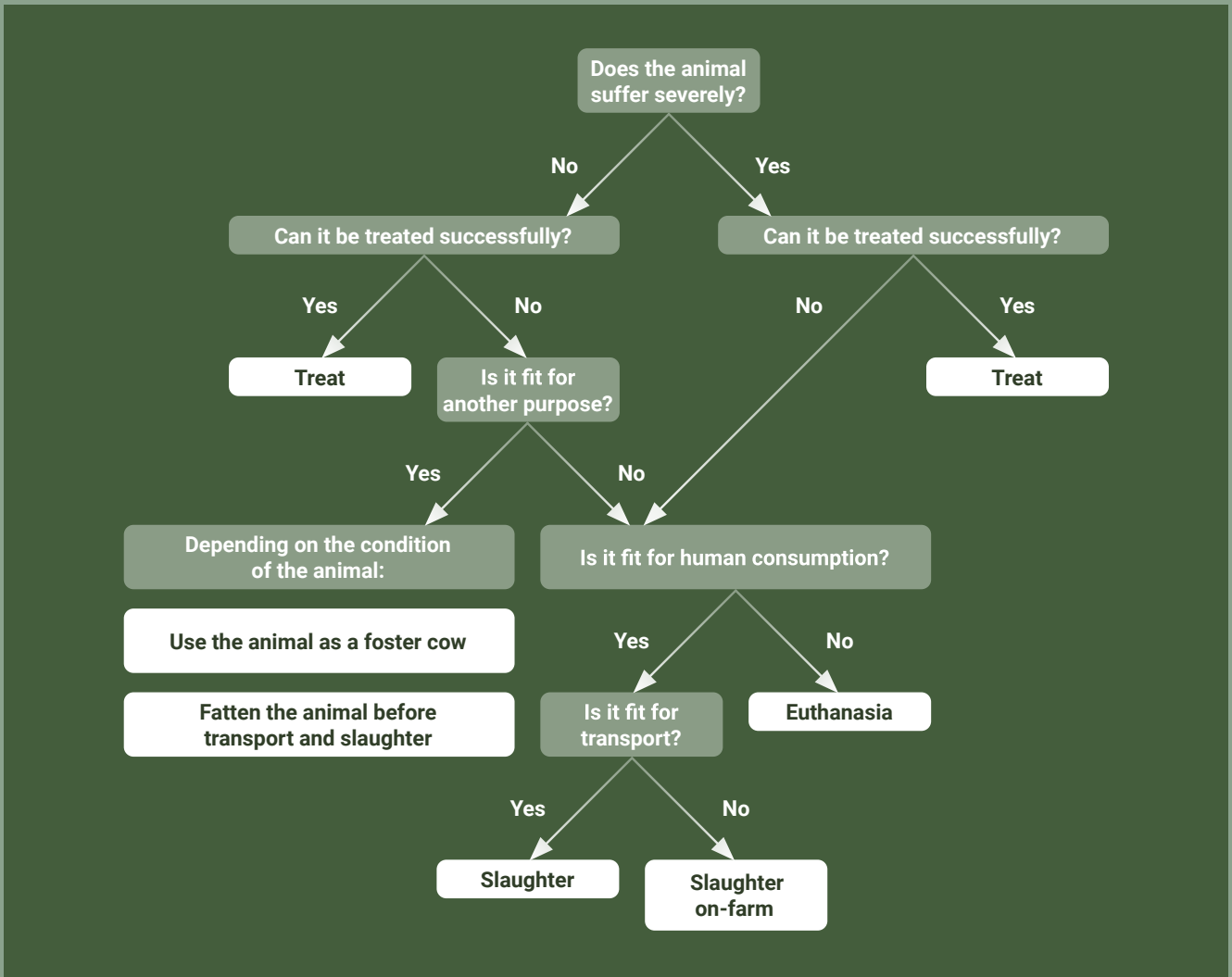


Figure 1. End of life decision tree

Management of the end of life

- ✓ In chronic welfare cases, where the animal is slightly injured but ambulatory and comfortable, and the decision has been taken to end their life, transport for slaughter can be arranged on the condition that transport does not cause additional suffering. Details of the animal, circumstances and action taken should be recorded.
- ✓ Animals in severe pain should be identified promptly and made safe and comfortable by taking immediate remedial action. This might include moving them to a hospital pen, or if recumbent, a temporary isolation area may be set up, with access to food and water, where they are safe from harassment or trampling by other animals. Veterinary assistance should be sought, and where available, pain relief, prescribed by a veterinarian, should be given to make the animal comfortable.
- ✓ The farmer's attachment to the cow and economic factors influence decision making. Where the cause of severe pain is treatable and financially viable, appropriate actions should be taken to treat and ensure adequate pain relief is given and maintained (for as long as the condition requires, allowing for milk and/or meat withdrawal periods).



- ✓ If it is not possible to take care of a downer cow on a soft surface, her chances of recovery are poor. After 24 hours, if a downer cow has not recovered, a thorough evaluation should be made (preferably with a veterinarian) to decide on whether to continue with treatment or opt for euthanasia.

Euthanasia management

- ✓ Where an animal's condition is considered terminal, a decision must be made about whether the animal is suitable for entering the food chain, or whether they can be transported or whether immediate euthanasia on farm is required.
- ✓ Cattle, of any age, are unfit for transport if they are unable to stand up or remain standing; unable to move without pain (e.g. obviously lame, not distributing weight on all four legs, arched back, abnormal posture and gait, shallow frequent breathing); unable to move unassisted (loss of balance); affected by a severe open lesion or a prolapse; or in their last month of pregnancy.
- ✓ If the animal is unfit for transport, euthanasia (or on-farm slaughter if the meat is suitable for human consumption) must be carried out by an authorised person using a technique which results in a rapid death without pain or distress.
- ✓ Where an animal is euthanased or slaughtered on farm during the third trimester of pregnancy, special attention must be given to the welfare of the foetus, including the viability of their survival outside of the dam.
- ✓ Once the decision to end life has been made, this should be carried out without delay. In the interim period every effort should be made to ensure pain and stress are minimised. The animal should have easy access to food as dictated by their nutritional needs and water, they must be safe and comfortable, lactating cows should be milked to relieve udder pressure, animals with foot, leg or back injuries should not be expected to walk unnecessarily and stress from social isolation should be minimised whilst ensuring no risk of injury by other animals.
- ✓ Animals who are about to be euthanased or slaughtered should be separated from the herd.
- ✓ Euthanasia or slaughter should be performed in a way that does not stress other animals. Use low stress handling and try to avoid the smell of a frightened animal and loud noises.
- ✓ Euthanasia must be carried out by veterinarians, slaughterperson or qualified and authorised individual(s).



Best practice

- ★ **Best practice** farms record the number of animals that die through planned culling, emergency culling (euthanasia) and those that die on farm without being killed.
- ★ **Best practice** farms perform euthanasia using the most quick and effective means legally permitted. This may involve use of an injectable pharmaceutical by a veterinarian, or a captive bolt or firearm by a qualified and authorised individual.
- ★ **Best practice** farms have a contingency plan on the farm for situations where attendance by a visiting veterinarian to perform euthanasia is not feasible. If the animal is unfit for transport and the State legislation allows it, farm personnel may receive specialised training in conducting humane slaughter, using captive bolt or firearm which are stored in a safe or lock box only accessible by the qualified and authorised individual(s).

Summary



Farm

Where individual animals are perceived as having come to the end of their productive life, they should be cared for efficiently to ensure losses are minimised and the welfare of both the animals and the people on the farm are protected.



End of Career

Cows of any age, and at high risk of suffering, should be provided with appropriate pain relief and care. If they are not responsive to treatment or have a poor prognosis they should be slaughtered or euthanased in a humane manner, by a qualified and authorised individual, before they suffer severely.



Handler

Seeking support from a veterinarian will assist in making a prompt and effective decision regarding treatment, culling and euthanasia without delay and reduce the moral load on the farmer.

Take pride in all of your farm's good and best practices towards animal welfare!

Additional resources



Care4Dairy.eu

The positions expressed in this guide do not necessarily represent in legal terms the official position of the European Commission.



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