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Euthanasia

Boy howdy, talk about a tough subject to tackle! Most livestock producers at some time will be required to end the life of an animal, so while it is tough, it is important to talk about. I've spent most of my week working with a team of agents and specialists from across Kansas, learning how to train first responders to address livestock emergency situations. The unfortunate reality is that in accidents or natural disasters involving livestock, euthanasia is something that needs to be addressed.

Euthanasia is defined as a good death - "eu" which means well + "thanatos" which means death. The death of the animal should be painless and stress free. It is the responsibility of all livestock producers to either have the skills and equipment to accomplish this or to know someone who does. Those of us involved in livestock production understand the "ancient contract" between humans and animals and don't take lightly the responsibility for their care.

The decision to euthanize an animal should be based on the welfare of the animal. Euthanasia should be used to relieve suffering and pain. Also, it should be used when there is no hope for improvement in the animal's condition or when additional treatments will not change the outcome. Some common reasons for euthanasia are severe fractures, uncontrollable pain, animals too weak for transport, paralysis, and terminal illness.

Livestock producers have three euthanasia options: injectable solutions, gunshot, and captive bolt (CB). Injectable euthanasia solutions provide a rapid loss of consciousness and death. With the regulatory rules associated with narcotics, livestock producers wishing to use this method would need the services of a veterinarian. In addition, this method will require proper disposal of the carcass since scavenging animals may become sick and/or die from ingesting the carcass.

Gunshot is one of the more common methods of euthanasia used on ranches and farms. When used properly, gunshot provides a quick and humane death. Producers using this method need to be aware of the dangers of firearm use. Research done at Kansas State University is now widely adapted industry standard on right sizing gunshot euthanasia.

Captive bolt is another option, although not as common in the field as it is at harvest facilities. With proper placement, captive bolt causes immediate loss of consciousness. However, death is not definite. To assure death, another step will be necessary such as exsanguination, use of a pithing rod, or use of saturated solutions to stop the heart such as magnesium sulfate or potassium chloride. Administering these solutions requires the ability to give intravenous injections. Livestock producers, who use gunshot, or CB methods for euthanasia, must have a thorough understanding of the anatomical sites for proper placement of the gunshot or CB.

When a producer uses either the gunshot or captive bolt method, the animal should collapse immediately. The producer may observe some slight muscle twitching. Following unconsciousness, the producer will need to confirm death. Confirmation of death includes lack of corneal reflex (applying pressure to the eye with no blink), dilated and fixed pupil, lack of pulse, lack of breathing, lack of response to a firm toe pinch, graying of the mucous membranes, and/or failure to detect respiratory sounds or heartbeat with a stethoscope.

Euthanasia is sometimes the difficult choice livestock producers must make. If the producer decides to euthanize the animal, they should be thoroughly trained in the proper use of the euthanasia method. Euthanasia needs to be painless and stress free. For more information on euthanasia of livestock, producers should contact their veterinarian or speak to trained Extension agents.