

Euthanizing Dairy Cattle

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Euthanasia should be done with care and caution. Every once in a while, dairy managers will have to deal with severely injured or diseased cattle. Euthanasia should be conducted on animals that are suffering from an irreversible disease or injury. All methods used should produce rapid death where the animal experiences no detectable pain or distress. In the case of using lethal medications, a licensed veterinarian must perform the euthanasia protocols. In cases where no veterinarian is available, a farmer may conduct euthanasia on his cattle in a humane and effective manner. You may choose to euthanize with a gunshot or captive bolt. Captive bolt must be followed by exsanguination or “bleeding out”, and is mostly used in harvest situations. This article focuses on using gunshot as a humane way to euthanize animals on your farm.

Follow the steps listed below to euthanize humanely & effectively:

- Gunshot leads to instantaneous death, is inexpensive, and does not require close contact with the cattle.
- First it must be understood that firearms should not be used unless the farmer is trained in the use of firearms and understands the potential dangers associated with them. Before using a firearm to euthanize cattle, check surroundings to ensure no one will be harmed in the event of a ricochet.
- A pistol or rifle firing .22 caliber bullets (including soft or hollow point) can be used to humanely euthanize young cattle, but these may not consistently penetrate the skull of adult cows and bulls. Although a .22 caliber solid point bullet may be sufficient, it is recommended that .357 caliber or 9mm bullets be used on large adult cows and bulls in order to produce consistently acceptable results.
- Gunshot should always be made in the appropriate location on the forehead. The bullet should enter at a right angle to the forehead to minimize the possibility of ricocheting and injuring those nearby. Draw an imaginary line diagonally from horn position to the inside corner of the eye on the other side of the head. This “X” across the face will meet exactly where the bullet should enter.
- The firearm should be 1 to 2 feet from the intended target with a rifle, or 2 to 10 inches for a pistol.
- The final step is ensuring that the cow is dead. Check the cow by corneal reflex (touching the surface of the eyeball) several minutes after the shot to confirm death. Farmers should dispose of the carcass in a manner that is appropriate for their environmental guidelines.

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- For more information, please refer to [“Practical Euthanasia of Cattle”](#) written by the American Association of Bovine Practitioners.

Veterinarians and cattle producers should discuss euthanasia protocols to implement on farm that would in turn minimize animal suffering, improve animal welfare standards, and reduce economic losses.