

Preventing and Handling Disabled Cattle on the Farm¹

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Take Home Message

- ✓ A 'disabled' or 'infirm' animal is one that has its state of health compromised to some degree and is unable to function normally. A 'downer' animal is severely disabled to the extent that it is unable to raise itself to standing and walking state. These animals must not be dragged.
- ✓ Disabled cattle in the feedlot can be the result of accidents, carelessness, medical complications, fatigue, or weather conditions (e.g. ice). Disabled animals represent a very small percentage of the total livestock handled, but due to size or other complications, moving them humanely is difficult.
- ✓ Reducing the risks at the feedlot, in transit and at livestock markets is an important step in preventing disabling injuries. The emphasis should be on preventing disabilities but, when they do occur, the animals must be handled promptly and humanely.

Preventing Cattle from Becoming Disabled

Producer care and attention to good management practices can prevent most disabilities from occurring. Disabled animals are an economic burden to the producer, the trucker and the processor. They also represent significant problems from a humane standpoint. Some situations in which animals become disabled are preventable through proper livestock handling. Every effort must be made to prevent their occurrence through:

- **Training:** People who handle cattle should be trained to handle animals correctly. Good handling practices require consistent commitment. Do not tolerate any animal mishandling!
- **Facilities:** Adequate space, secure footing and properly designed and maintained housing and loading equipment not only reduce costly accidents and bruising but also save time and money by increasing the ease and efficiency of handling animals.

- Good husbandry: Providing proper nutrition and sanitation will reduce the likelihood of animals becoming disabled. Marketing animals while they are still in good physical condition will reduce in-transit occurrence of downers.

Specific Recommendations for Feedlots

- Reduce the risk of metabolic problems, which can cause an animal to go down by providing proper nutrition. The services of a professional nutritionist and veterinarian must be used whenever a metabolic disease outbreak occurs.
- Follow good management and sanitation practices to minimize bacterial infections such as foot rot. Ensure injuries and infections are dealt with promptly to prevent additional complications.
- Provide secure footing. Nonslip flooring in processing and treatment areas is essential to prevent crippling falls. Nonslip flooring should be durable, easily cleaned and maintained, and appropriate to the livestock species and use. Roughen smooth floors with a grooving machine or saw; or use sand to provide nonslip footing. Ensure loading facilities are properly designed to minimize accidents. Reduce hazards in yards and pastures.
- Handle cattle slowly and gently to prevent injuries and falls. Do not prod excessively. Never force them to run.
- Have animals that are losing condition checked promptly. Old or physically challenged animals (including cancer eye victims) should be culled and moved directly to a local packing plant while still strong enough to make the trip. If downed animals have been chronically ill and recently treated with antibiotics they should not leave the farm. They should be euthanized. If a downed animal (non-ambulatory animal) is free of drug residues, the animal may be slaughtered at the feedlot.
- Heifers calving in the feedlot are 'accidents' and sometimes become disabled as a result. Since the mating was not planned, the heifer may be too small to calve safely. Segregation and close supervision of the heifer in late pregnancy is required in order to provide proper management at calving. For small heifers, caesarian section or euthanasia may be the only alternative. Prevent calving paralysis (pinched nerves) by following proper calving procedures including proper and careful use of calf pullers. In the event of calving paralysis, give heifers the opportunity to recover by allowing them to rest in well-bedded pens that provide secure footing. Check with your veterinarian to ensure proper treatment is provided and to get an accurate prognosis (the likelihood of a cure).

- New born calves are a common welfare concern in the feedlot. If heifers in the feedlot calve during inclement winter weather shelter should be provided for the new mother and calf. All newborn calves should receive adequate colostrum soon after birth to help establish immunity to illnesses encountered in movement and shipping. The navel should be properly treated. Calves should not be transported until they are at least 3 days old if going direct to another farm, or 8 days old if going through a livestock market. Calves must be handled and transported with the utmost care.

Ways to Humanely Handle Disabled Livestock

Even with the best precautions, cattle will still sometimes become disabled. It is important to be prepared to properly handle and care for disabled cattle when they do occur. With proper care and treatment, (depending on the condition) some disabled (non-ambulatory) cattle can become ambulatory again and return to feeding pens, be transported to slaughter or salvage slaughtered at the feedlot. By following recommended procedures, and using approved methods and proper equipment, it is possible to handle and transport these animals in a humane manner:

- Deliver an injured but otherwise healthy disabled animal directly to a local processing plant. Use methods, vehicles and equipment required for humanely loading and transporting these animals. Examples of this type of animal are bloated (if not weak/down), chronic BVD, lame (reluctant to walk or has halted movement), Rupture, frozen limbs, recent injury, cancer eye, or blind.
- Disabled livestock that have been chronically ill, that have recently been treated with antibiotics, or that are in extreme distress should be euthanized at the feedlot. (See: Emergency Slaughter). Examples of this type of animal are the very weak, thin, downers, septic arthritis, animals with broken legs or pelvises that are unable to rise or stand.
- Animals that can be nursed back to health must be protected from further injury and provided shelter, feed and water. Veterinary care should be provided.

Slide boards/mats

Slide boards/mats can be used to move both large and small downed animals in most situations. Slide boards should be made of smooth metal or durable plywood with an attachment ring. Cow mats/conveyer belting must be reinforced along one edge with metal strips and attachment ring or yoke; this prevents the mat/belting from buckling and bending when the animal is moved.

- The animal is gently rolled onto the board or mat.
- To move the animal, the rope, chain or cable is attached to the mat or board.
- The board/mat is then dragged using a winch or tractor.
- There should be no pull on the animal directly.
- The board/mat can be dragged directly onto trucks with loading ramps, or onto a forklift pallet.
- To keep it calm, the animal's head should be secured to the slide board or mat by a halter or restraining strap. Covering its eyes may also help keep the animal calm.

Forklifts

If a forklift is used, a platform or pallet must be used.

- Standard forklift forks should never be slid under an animal to move it.
- Restraining straps should be used to prevent the animal from falling off.

Front-end loaders

If loader buckets are used, they must be of adequate size to accommodate the animal.

- A skid steer loader (bobcat) is adequate for small calves and requires two people. One person operates the machine while the other rolls the animal gently into the bucket.
- A larger loader may be adequate for larger animals provided the bucket is not divided. At least three people will be required to transfer the animal into the bucket. One person runs the machine, while the other two gently roll the animal into the bucket.
- Pushing an animal against a wall or fence to get it into a loader bucket is unacceptable.
- Moving of downer animals will be more humane if a lid or cover or restraining strap is used and will also prevent the animal from falling out.

Hand carts

Small downer calves can easily be moved with small carts such as modified hand carts.

- A heavy duty, standard hand cart (generally used for moving boxes) can be modified with an enlarged platform and back-board.
- The platform is slid under the animal or the animal is lifted or rolled onto the platform, then the hand cart is tilted back to move the animal onto the platform.
- A second person should be present to assist the loading and to steady the animal on the platform.

Specialized equipment – slings, ‘cow caddys’, stone boats (sleds)

The above types of specially designed equipment are good methods of moving downed animals provided they are used in accordance with the manufacturer’s recommendations.

- In all cases, animals should be off-loaded by gently rolling or lifting them out.
- If the techniques described above are not practical, then the animal should be euthanized.

Acknowledgement

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