

# Animal Welfare and Handling

## What is animal welfare?

Animal welfare refers to the overall physical and mental well-being of animals.

## The importance of animal welfare and handling

Humanely handling and slaughtering animals:

- Prevents needless stress and suffering of the animal being slaughtered
- Minimizes stress due to excitement, pain, distress, injury, or discomfort to animals during transport, handling and slaughter
- Results in safer working conditions for workers, and visitors
- Is required by law
- Improves the quality of meat products
- Decreases financial loss to meat packers
- Can satisfy a buyer's requirement of a formalized animal welfare program
- Addresses public concerns of animal cruelty

## Willful acts of abuse

Purposely or willfully abusing an animal is **never** acceptable and not tolerated, no matter the circumstances.

Willful acts of abuse refers to any situation where a person knowingly or intentionally inflicts undue pain or distress on an animal. These include, but are not limited to:

- Dragging a conscious animal, non-ambulatory or otherwise
- Intentionally using a prod on sensitive parts of an animal such as eyes, ears, mouth, nose, anus, vulva, testicles, udder or belly
- Excessive prodding
- Deliberately slamming gates on animals
- Malicious driving of animals on top of each other
- Purposely driving animals off of high ledges or drops
- Hitting, kicking or beating an animal
- Allowing animals to freeze to a floor or trailer
- Lifting sheep by the wool or throwing small animals

Any of these actions are considered acts of abuse. If these acts occur in a provincially licensed facility, slaughter will be stopped or suspended by Meat and Dairy Inspection Section inspectors, until appropriate corrective action has been taken. If these acts occur at any provincially licensed slaughter operation, the Alberta SPCA could be called in to investigate.

## Animal welfare considerations

Transportation and slaughter processes are important considerations in the welfare of the animals. As most provincially licensed slaughter operations conduct limited transportation of animals, the animal welfare information in this newsletter focuses on unloading, housing/lairage, movement, stunning and bleeding.

### Unloading

- Suitable animals are unloaded as soon as possible after arrival at the destination
- Unloading facilities are of appropriate height and designed to promote easy flow of animals

- Ramps allow animals to walk freely
- Lighting is sufficient for animals and handlers to see clearly and does not create shadows or dark areas that cause animals to balk (refuse to move forwards)
- Flooring prevents falling/slipping
- No sharp projections are present in floors or walls/fencing that may cause injury

## Housing/Lairage

- Floors are non-slip
- Bedding is provided if necessary
- Pens and holding areas are regularly cleaned, provide adequate space, protection from weather, and are specific for the species being housed (ensure incompatible species are not housed together)
- Feed, water and bedding is provided for any animal being held for more than 24 hours

## Movement

- Minimal distractions like reflections, shadows, blowing air or high-pitched noises
- No appearance of dead ends in chutes
- Vocalizations should be minimal or absent
- Movement of animals should provide for a consistent flow without the need for excessive prodding to move animals from one area to another
  - If animal movement is consistently an issue, the handling system needs to be evaluated and changes to the system to facilitate animal handling and flow may be needed

## Stunning and bleeding

- Restraining systems are properly designed and maintained
- Animals are rendered insensible on the first attempt and remain so until bled out (i.e., no signs of sensibility)
- Animals should not vocalize due to pain or stress

## Common issues affecting animal movement

- Many animal handling challenges can be avoided or minimized if operators allow animals time and space to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. Forcing animals to move quickly may cause them to bunch, crowd, slip or fall.
- Livestock naturally like to stay in groups and follow a leader. Calm animals are easiest to handle, and care is needed to keep animals calm. If animals become excited, it can be beneficial to leave them alone for 30 minutes before trying again to move them.
- Poor facility design and maintenance can make animal handling more challenging and contribute to slips and falls. A slow and measured approach will prevent injuries and improve animal welfare and meat quality.
- Spots of sunlight, shadow, dark spaces, flapping objects, rattling chains, puddles of water and other distractions can disrupt the flow of animals.
- Airflow, including exhaust from pneumatic gates, needs to be quiet and directed away from animals.
- Don't over fill handling areas such as crowd pens and staging areas. These areas should ideally be only half full.
- It is best to move animals in small groups so that the handler can influence the lead animal(s).
- Lone animals can be dangerous to handle. Difficult or agitated single animals will often calm down when placed back into a group.

## Animal movement devices and tools

### People

People working with live animals should be trained in animal handling and act with respect towards the animals. Along with training, people with a calm demeanor should be considered for working with animals. The operator's commitment and expectation for animal welfare should be apparent at all times and ensures that workers or others are monitored regularly for good handling practices and issues are promptly addressed.

## Electric prods

Electric prods, commonly found in slaughter operations, are the last tool to be used to get an animal to move. Very few animals require the use of a prod to move.

Prods should not be routinely carried by workers, to reduce dependence on these tools and encourage the use of other tools for animal movement.

A well-designed operation with well-trained workers can greatly reduce or even eliminate the need to use an electric prod. In many slaughter operations, the only place a prod is needed is at the entrance to the stun box or restraining alley. Even in these places, prods should only be used on limited animals and only as a last resort.

Electric prods should be adjusted to the lowest setting and never used on sensitive areas such as eyes, mouth, nose, vulva, testicles, udder or anus.

Electric prods are ineffective on sheep because the wool insulates their bodies from electric shocks. This may lead to use on inappropriate areas such as the face or genitals.

## Other options for animal movement

There are other options to persuade movement in animals, including flags, boards, rattle paddles or a plastic bag tied to the end of a whip or handle. These tools can be effective options to gently move animals using noise, creating movement in the animal's visual field, or creating a temporary barrier. Movement tools must never be used on an animal in an aggressive or violent manner (e.g., beat, strike or "karate chop").

## Animal Welfare Legislation

There is federal and provincial legislation that require animals to be treated with care and respect. The following legislation applies to all animals, including those transported to slaughter operations.

[Health of Animals Act](#)

[Health of Animals Regulation \(HAR\) Part XII: Transport of Animals](#)

[Meat Inspection Act](#) and [Meat Inspection Regulation \(MIR\)](#)

[Animal Protection Act](#) and [Animal Protection Regulation](#)

## For additional information on animal welfare and handling

[Dr. Temple Grandin, Dept. of Animal Science, Colorado State University](#)

[Behavioral Principles of Livestock Handling](#)

[Understanding Flight Zone and Point of Balance for Low Stress Handling of Cattle, Sheep and Pigs](#)

[North American Meat Institute: Recommended animal handling guidelines and audit guide](#)

[Alberta Farm Animal Care](#)

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