

Humane And Ethical Treatment Of Down Cattle



By Ryan Leiterman, D.V.M.

Dealing with downer cattle is a problem that faces every dairy in the United States at one time or another.

The sheer size of cattle makes their movement and treatment problematic. Often times moving down cattle requires the use of heavy machinery and if done inappropriately it can injure the animal further. Downer cattle and their treatment is one of the largest animal welfare issues facing the dairy industry today. Developing a protocol for dealing with down cattle on your dairy is an important aspect of ensuring that all downer animals are dealt with in a practical, humane fashion.

Why Cattle Become Downers

Cattle have many reasons for becoming recumbent, or down. Most down cows are down as a result of injuries like splaying out or calving paralysis, metabolic diseases such as milk fever or grass tetany or infectious diseases like toxic mastitis or toxic metritis. With any of these conditions, a timely and accurate diagnosis of why the animal is down along with appropriate medical therapy will improve their chances of recovery.

Movement

Most down cattle respond positively to treatment and get up. For those that do not rise after initial treatment, they will often need to be moved from one location on the farm to another to facilitate recovery. For example, a cow that slips in the parlor and cannot rise may need to be moved to a deeply bedded pack as a part of her recovery. The sheer size of most cattle makes practical, humane movement difficult and often times frustrating. The number one rule in moving down cattle is to always be patient and never try to move a down cow alone. Simply dragging cattle by a halter or a chain around the neck is unacceptable and exposes the animal to further trauma and abrasions. Loading cattle into skid loader buckets may be an easy way to move down cattle but this exposes the animal to potential injury from the loading process. Also, these animals are not secured in the bucket and may injure themselves from uncontrolled thrashing during transport. Hip hoists are tools that if used inappropriately can cause severe trauma and should not be used as a tool to move a down cow. The pressure exerted on the hips of a cow with a hip hoist is immense and can often lead to severe muscle damage and bruising and may even cause permanent damage if used for too long a duration.

The best way to move down cattle is to get two to four people to roll a cow onto a flat transport mat. Thick, heavy rubber mats specifically designed for moving down cattle are commercially available. The cow is rolled onto the mat and the mat is attached to a tractor or skid loader and slowly moved to the treatment area. Some dairy farms use an old eight foot steel gate with plywood on top to roll the cow onto. Once on the gate, the cow can be moved to the treatment area without abrasions or trauma from the move. Remember to always halter the cow before rolling her. The halter will give the people moving her control over her head and it can also be used to assist in controlling the animal during the move. It cannot be stressed enough that moving a down cow is a process that will involve multiple (2-4) people on the dairy if it is to be done humanely.

When to Involve the Veterinarian

Determining the exact cause of why a cow is down and administering successful treatment can be one of the most difficult parts of a veterinarian's day. When the on farm staff does not know why the animal is down, or cannot treat the condition keeping the animal down, a veterinarian should become involved. A veterinarian is also uniquely qualified to determine the prognosis of down cattle and make recommendations on which animals have a high likelihood of recovery and which ones should be humanely euthanized. If you are unsure if a down cow is suffering or should be put down it is important that veterinary advice is sought in a timely manner.

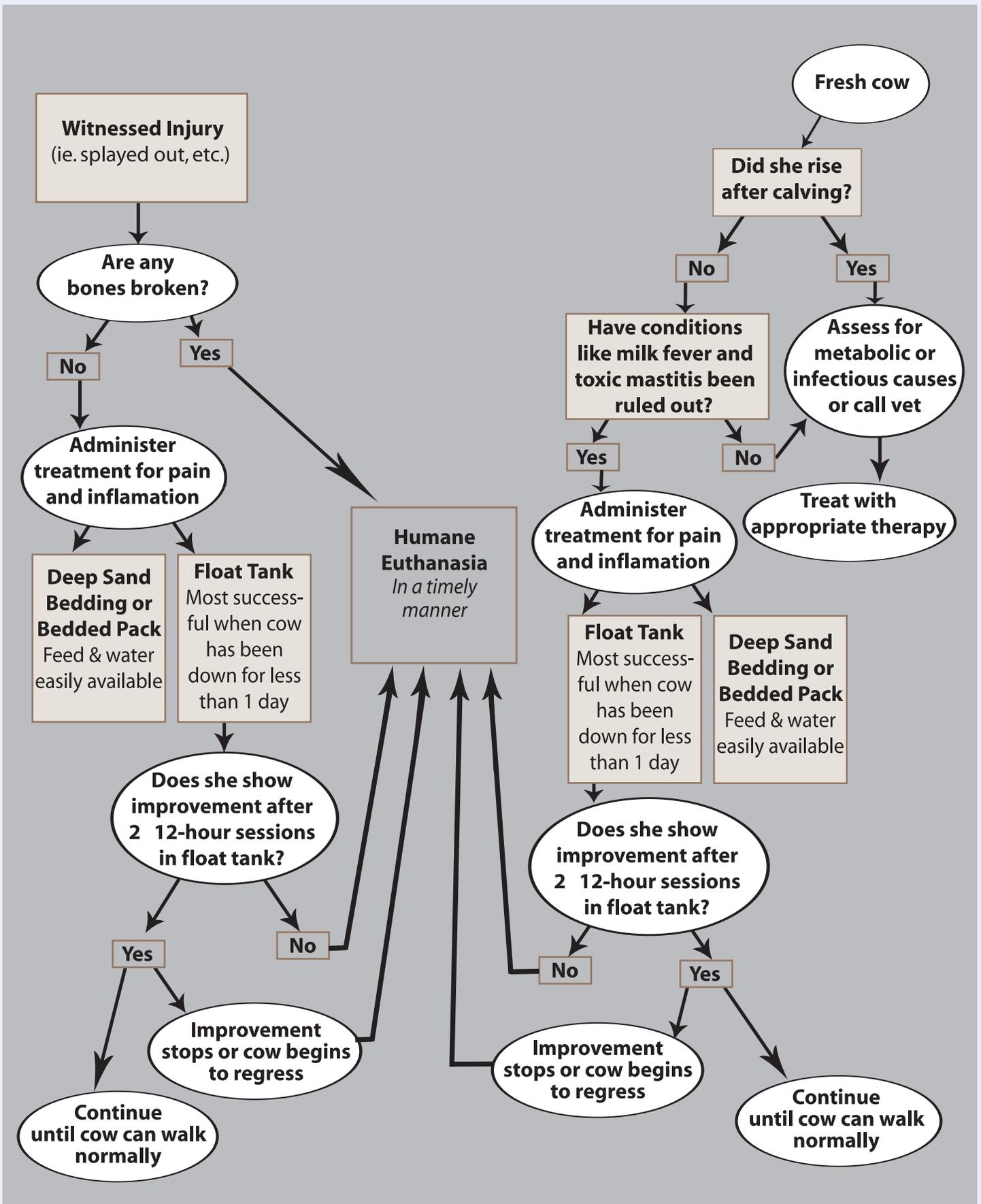
Practical Cattle Euthanasia

When it becomes unlikely that a down cow will recover enough to stand, euthanasia of that animal becomes an important option. The definition of euthanasia is "the intentional causing of a painless and easy death to a patient suffering from an incurable or painful disease". Cattle with incurable conditions such as bone fractures or severe infections should be euthanized. Criteria to consider when

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Down Cow Decision Tree

Deciding how to deal with down cattle can be complicated. Below is a flow chart that can be used as an aid in your decision making process on how to handle down cattle on your farm.



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making the decision if a cow should be euthanized include: 1) pain and stress being experienced by animal 2) likelihood of recovery 3) ability to provide adequate feed and water 4) medications involved in treatment 5) probability of condemnation at slaughter and 6) economic factors governing treatment.

On many dairies the most practical form of euthanasia is either by lethal injection by the veterinarian or by gun shot. If using a gun to disrupt the brain, a caliber greater than a .22 should be used. A deer rifle or shotgun with slugs is an appropriate caliber. Draw two lines with tail chalk. One from the inside corner of the left eye to the base of the right ear and the other from the inside corner of the right eye to the base of the left ear. Where the lines cross is where the brain is and where the shot should be delivered. A complete guide to different practical forms of humane cattle euthanasia can be found online at <http://www.aabp.org/resources/euth.pdf>. This guide can be downloaded and printed off for on farm use.

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