

On-Farm Euthanasia Decision-Making for Commercial Meat Rabbits



Euthanasia is the act of ending the life of an animal in a way that minimizes or eliminates pain and distress. It is characterized by rapid, irreversible insensibility followed by prompt death.

A good death is critical to the humane termination of an animal's life.

It is essential that everyone who works with rabbits be trained and competent to recognize normal behaviour as well as signs of pain, injury, illness or distress that indicate that euthanasia may be necessary. Each producer should develop a plan to promptly separate and observe, treat, ship or, in the case of an animal that is not responding to or cannot be treated, euthanize a rabbit.

Rabbit Grimace Scale

It is difficult to observe signs of pain in rabbits since rabbits have evolved to hide pain and injuries from predators. Recent research has shown that rabbit facial expressions can be useful for assessing pain and discomfort.

The Rabbit Grimace Scale is a tool that can be used to assess whether a rabbit is in pain and needs to be closely observed, treated or euthanized. The action units (see table) should only be used in animals that are awake. Each animal should be observed for a short period of time to avoid scoring brief changes in facial expression that are unrelated to the animal's welfare. Rabbits with a higher total score (demonstrating more 'obviously present' facial action units) are more likely to be experiencing pain and distress.

	Facial Action Units*		
	Not present "0"	Moderately present "1"	Obviously present "2"
Orbital tightening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closing of the eyelid (narrowing of the orbital area) A wrinkle may be visible around the eye 			
Cheek flattening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flattening of the cheeks. When 'obviously present', cheeks have a sunken look. The face becomes more angular and less rounded 			
Nostril shape <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nostrils are drawn vertically forming a 'V' rather than a 'U' shape Nose tip is moved downwards towards the chin 			
Ear shape and position <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ears become more tightly folded/curled (more cylindrical) in shape Ears move from facing towards the source of sound, towards the hindquarters Ears may be held closer to the back or sides of the body 			

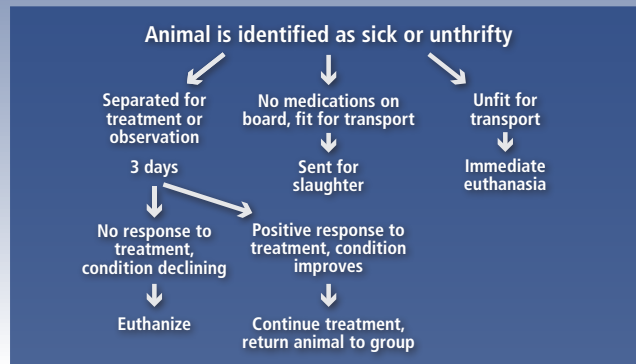
* Whisker position can also be used to assist with pain assessment. Whiskers stiffen, move downward away from the face, and will be pushed out in a painful animal.

It is important to euthanize rabbits without delay if they:

- are unlikely to recover from a condition or illness
- fail to respond to treatment and recovery protocols
- have signs of chronic, severe or debilitating pain and distress
- are unable to access feed and water
- are unable to stand or walk
- show marked weight loss or loss of body condition

Developing an on-farm euthanasia decision plan can provide guidance for personnel in making consistent decisions on when rabbits need to be euthanized.

See the following example of a decision-making plan.



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