

Humane destruction of sheep and cattle

Current as of May 2024.

This fact sheet assists a person responsible for livestock in meeting their animal welfare obligations when destroying (euthanising/killing) sheep and cattle.

Legislation

Under animal welfare law in Western Australia, a person must ensure an animal suffering from severe distress, disease or injury that cannot be reasonably treated, is humanely destroyed promptly and safely by a competent person, or under the direct supervision of a competent person.

Competent person

Destruction of an animal must be undertaken by a competent person, or under the direct supervision of a competent person.

If a competent person is not reasonably available, a person who is not a competent person may destroy the animal (if it is necessary in order to prevent undue suffering by the animal) as long as they take reasonable steps to kill the animal humanely.

A competent person is a person that has the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to do the relevant task competently.

Direct supervision

Direct supervision requires a supervised person to act under the direct supervision of another person where that person:

- provides instruction and guidance to the supervised person in relation to the act
- oversees and evaluates the act
- is on the same premises as the supervised person while the act is being performed, and
- is able to immediately render assistance to the supervised person, if required, at any time during the performance of the act.

Humane destruction – general considerations

Humane destruction **must** cause rapid unconsciousness and then the animal's death while it is unconscious. It should be carried out with the minimum number of people present, and the animal should be handled with care and appropriately restrained (if applicable).

Humane destruction methods

Various methods for destroying an animal are available (see Table 1 for details). The choice of method will depend on several factors including:

- the species of animal
- its age and thickness of skull (especially for bulls)

- availability of equipment
- safety for animals
- safety for operators and others in the vicinity.

Any equipment used should be well maintained and selected according to the species and size of animals being destroyed.

A method of humane destruction is one that results in:

- rapid loss of consciousness immediately followed by rapid death (e.g. an effective gunshot to the brain), or
- rapid loss of consciousness (e.g. penetrating captive bolt gun), followed by a terminal procedure while the animal is unconscious.

Euthanasia of large mobs or herds

If it is necessary to euthanise many animals at once, where possible, animals should be euthanised out of sight of other animals to minimise stress and disturbance. This may involve working from the back of the race and moving forward when euthanising a line of stock or bringing in small mobs one at a time.

You might also consider using a barrier (like shade cloth) between live animals and those being euthanised. Ideally, bring one animal through at a time and remove them once they are euthanised before the next animal is brought through.

In addition:

- Use low-stress stock handling techniques to move animals to a suitable holding area.
- Remove deceased animals from the culling area before commencing another mob.
- After culling is completed cover blood-spoiled ground with dirt or scrape the soiled layer away.
- Be aware of safety considerations if discharging firearms around or in metal yards.

Terminal procedure

Some methods require an additional terminal procedure once the animal is unconscious to ensure death occurs before the animal regains consciousness.

Terminal procedures include:

- an extra firearm shot to the brain, destroying the brain stem,
- bleeding out (exsanguination), achieved by using a suitable, sharp knife to cut the main blood vessels at the top of the heart via the thoracic inlet (chest stick) or in the neck (neck cut),
- pithing, insertion of a rod into the brainstem causing death.

Confirming death of animal

A person who destroys an animal **must** take reasonable steps to confirm that the animal is dead, by observing **three or more** of the following signs:

- loss of consciousness and absence of deliberate movement
- absence of rhythmic breathing movements for at least five minutes
- absence of corneal 'blink' reflex when eyeball is touched
- maximum dilation of the pupil and no response to light
- absence of a heartbeat or pulse after three minutes

Humane destruction at saleyards

Humane destruction procedure for saleyards

An operator of a saleyard must ensure a written procedure is prepared that provides for the humane destruction of sheep and cattle at the saleyard (the saleyard's humane destruction procedure).

The saleyard's humane destruction procedure must be readily accessible at the saleyard by any person handling sheep and cattle at the saleyard.

A person available to carry out humane destruction of livestock

An operator of a saleyard must ensure that, when any sheep or cattle are at the saleyard, there is a person at the saleyard who:

- has the knowledge, skills and experience to destroy livestock of the species and class that are usually held at the saleyard using a method of humane destruction
- has ready access at the saleyard to suitable equipment for the destruction
- is available to carry out, or directly supervise, the destruction.

More information

- *Animal Welfare Act 2002*
- Animal Welfare (Transport, Saleyards and Depots) (Cattle and Sheep) Regulations 2020
- The following Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines:
 - Land Transport of Livestock
 - Livestock at Saleyards and Depots
 - Sheep
 - Cattle
- Animal Welfare Factsheets:
 - Animal Welfare Responsibilities – Consignors and Transporters
 - Animal Welfare Responsibilities – Saleyards
- [agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare](https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare)



For more information and to view the suite of animal welfare factsheets, scan the QR code, or visit: <https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare/resources-and-publications>.

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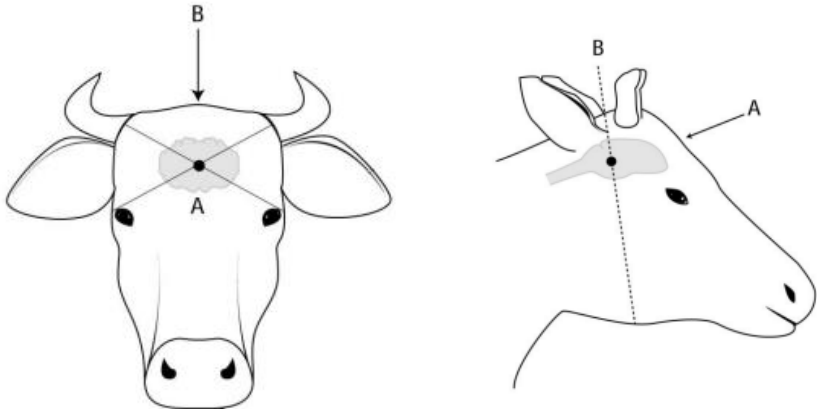
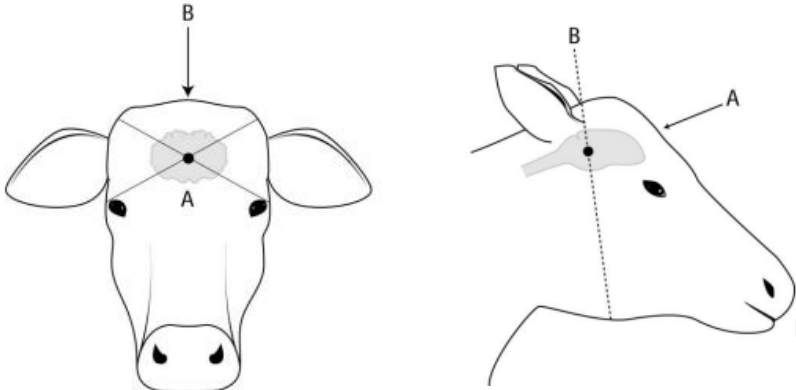
Table 1 – Acceptable methods of humane destruction

Appropriate methods	Adult cattle (Cattle over 6 months of age)	Calves (Cattle under 6 months of age)	Sheep
Firearms <i>See Table 3</i> Close range firearm shot: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frontal position (preferred) • poll position 	YES Cows, young steers, yearlings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.22 magnum cartridge* Bulls (or larger animals) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.30 calibre high-power cartridge* 	YES Calves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.22 Long Rifle cartridge* 	YES Lambs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.22 Long Rifle cartridge* Adult sheep <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.22 Magnum cartridge*
Captive bolt gun (penetrating) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frontal or poll position Additional terminal procedure to cause death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bleeding out, or • pithing. 	YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frontal position only • Activators appropriate to the class of cattle. 	YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activators appropriate to the size of calf. 	YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activators appropriate to the class of sheep.
Lethal Injection (<i>See # below</i>)	YES	YES	YES
Blunt force trauma	NO	YES, if all the following requirements are met: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the calf is less than 24 hours old • not in a saleyard • single blow to the skull. Must be followed by an additional terminal procedure to cause death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • firearm shot, or • bleeding out. 	YES, if all the following requirements are met: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less than 10 kilograms or less than 24 hours old • not in a saleyard or depot • single blow to the skull. Must be followed by an additional terminal procedure to cause death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • firearm shot, or • bleeding out.
Bleeding out (exsanguination)	NO	NO	NO unless: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there is no firearm or captive bolt reasonably available, and • the animal is not at a depot or saleyard • suitable sharp knife used. Cut transects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • both carotid arteries, and • both jugular veins.
* 0.22 Long Rifle (Standard) cartridge (> 100 foot-pounds muzzle energy) * 0.22 magnum cartridge (>300 foot-pounds muzzle energy) * 0.30 calibre high-power cartridge (>1000 foot-pounds muzzle energy) # Lethal injection to be administered only by a veterinarian or person authorised under the <i>Veterinary Practices Act 2021</i> .			

Table 2 – Unacceptable methods of destruction

Method	ADULT CATTLE (Over 6 months of age)	CALVES (Under 6 months of age)	SHEEP
Firearm shot not targeting the brain	NO	NO	NO
Non-penetrating captive bolt devices	NO	NO	NO
Penetrating captive bolt with no additional terminal procedure	NO	NO	NO
Bleeding out of conscious animal	NO	NO	NO See Table 1 for exceptions
Single blow to forehead	NO	NO – If animal is less than 24 hours old at a saleyard NO – if animal is more than 24 hours old	NO – If animal is less than 24 hours old or less than 10kg and at a saleyard NO – If animal is more than 24 hours old

Table 3 – Recommended positions and directions for firearm shots to the head

Cattle	Sheep
	
<p>The diagrams are representational and individual anatomical differences should be considered.</p> <p>A = frontal method (firearms and captive bolt)</p> <p>B = poll method (firearms and captive bolt)</p> <p>Frontal method:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The firearm or captive bolt should be directed at a point midway across the forehead where two lines from the topside of the base of the ears and top of the eyes intersect. <p>Poll method:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The line of fire is through the skull just behind the base of the horns to target the brainstem. <p>Dots indicate: Point of aim</p> <p>Arrows indicate: Direction of aim</p>	