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Nebraska BQA: Handling compromised animals

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Cattle producers have long recognized the need of proper husbandry and stewardship for the animals entrusted into their care. Best livestock production practices, based on research and sound science, help ensure the well-being, animal health and productivity of cattle.

Even when cattlemen work hard to ensure that their cattle are properly cared for through all stages of production, seasonal changes, and economical environment, some animals will become injured, sick, or non-ambulatory to the extent of treatment or euthanasia. These animals are considered "compromised cattle" in the beef cattle industry.

Compromised animals are those with reduced capacity to withstand the stress of living or transportation due to injury, fatigue, infirmity, poor health, distress, very young or old age, impending birth or any other cause.

The percentage of cattle that fall into this category is low, and majority of the cattle entering the marketing channel are in good health and physical condition. Today's producers need to understand animal welfare concerns and how public perception has a major impact on the demand for beef. That is why every beef producer should implement a decision-making process to prevent or minimize pain, discomfort and further deterioration when caring for these animals.

Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) has developed the following decision-making steps to assist in the early detection of problems and allow caretakers to properly address them in a timely manner:

- **Prevention** – Biosecurity plans, herd health programs, facility designs, and effective (low-stress) handling practices, as well as early identification of herd or facility-related problems will help to prevent many animal health concerns or issues.
- **Observation** – Cattle should be observed several times daily, especially during feeding. Early detection of illness or injury and appropriate treatment are key elements in minimizing disease or discomfort and speed of recovery.
- **Treatment** – Treatment should be determined and administered as soon as possible to prevent the animal's condition from deteriorating. Consult with a veterinarian to develop treatment strategies for common ailments and herd health vaccination protocols.
- **Separation** – Segregate compromised animals into designated "hospital" pens or areas to permit close observation, treatment and easy access to feed and water without competition.

- **Transport** – If animals are fit for transport, decide where and when to ship them, ensuring all drug withdrawal times have been observed.
- **Euthanize** – All animals unfit for transport, non-ambulatory, or unfit for human consumption must be euthanized on-farm. Do not send these animals to auction markets or harvesting facilities.

The last two steps of the decision-making process can be the most difficult. Cattle producers reaching these step can consider the following guidelines when continuing through the decision-making process.

Animals that are unfit for transport or must be delayed for transport are those that: 1) are sick with fever greater than 104 degrees; 2) have not met drug withdrawal times; 3) have a body condition score of less than 2.5 or are thin; 4) are blind in both eyes or have severe cancer eye; 5) have a lame or broken leg; or 6) cannot be humanely loaded/transported. Some situations only require delayed time to recover before transport or to observe withdrawal times, but others might be candidates for transport with provisions and extra precautions to emergency processors.

For a more complete list and explanation, the publication "Caring for Compromised Cattle" can be found at bqa.unl.edu.

Caretakers will also encounter situations where an animal is unlikely to respond favorably to treatment or become non-ambulatory. In these situations, treatment success, potential for animal suffering, and presence of drug residues become the main issues and concerns, which make euthanasia of the animal the best available option.

Following the decision-making steps and reviewing the guidelines for transport and proper euthanasia, will assist producers with these difficult decisions. Finally, the bottom line is producing a wholesome, safe beef product for your consumers, your families and yourselves.

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