LEGISLATION and REGULATION

U.S. Humane Slaughter Regulations

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) published in the Federal Register (30 November 1979) final regulations pursuant to the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1978. The Act technically went into effect on 16 October 1979, but questions about the specific nature of the regulations and their economic impact on the slaughter industry delayed the final implementation.

The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1978 was preceded by the Humane Slaughter Act of 1958, passed to incorporate the 1958 humane slaughter law which mandated humane slaughter standards into the Federal Meat Inspection Act.

First, all slaughterhouses engaged in interstate commerce are automatically included. Foreign slaughterhouses exporting meat to the United States, all U.S. slaughterhouses in states which have federal meat inspection only, and any slaughterhouse engaged in interstate commerce are automatically included. Slaughterhouses confined to intrastate activity and states which maintain separate meat inspection systems have 18 months to comply with the new provisions. This period may be extended if new state legislation or regulations must be developed to meet federal standards.

Second, the penalty structure contained in the Federal Meat Inspection Act now applies to violations of humane slaughter regulations. The Secretary of Agriculture is authorized to suspend inspection at a slaughterhouse until the plant corrects violations. Slaughter operations must cease during the interim to comply with the Federal Meat Inspection Act’s ban on selling uninspected meat. Inspection can be permanently withdrawn only after a legal hearing.

The new law also broadens the definition of “pre-slaughter handling of livestock” to include treatment of animals from off-loading at the slaughterhouse premises to the moment of slaughter. Formerly, “pre-slaughter handling” referred exclusively to stunning practices. The final regulations prohibit the excessive use of electric prods, canvas slappers and other implements, as well as any use of pipes, sticks and other pointed objects which could cause injury or unnecessary pain to the livestock. This section of the regulations also requires that pens, drive alleys and ramps be maintained in good repair, and that floors be constructed and maintained to provide secure footing for the animals. Inhumane treatment of disabled animals (e.g., dragging) constitutes a violation. Animals must be watered in all holding pens and, if held longer than 24 hours, they must have access to feed and adequate room for resting overnight.

The Federal Meat Inspection Act does not protect all species of food animals. The USDA has exempted chickens, American bison, reindeer and calfs from its humane handling and slaughter provisions. The species to be regulated include cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, mules and other equines.

USDA officials do not believe that these new regulations will add to agency costs since federal inspectors are already on the premises of slaughter plants. Some slaughterhouses, however, face the considerable expense of installing new equipment to meet federal requirements.

Controversy continues over several of the stunning methods listed as acceptable under the government regulations. Carbon dioxide stunning of pigs has been criticized on the grounds that the animals tend to become excited (and therefore more difficult to anesthetize) as they are conveyed to the carbon dioxide chamber. Electrical stunning may also need further research to determine the proper placement of electrodes and the amount of voltage sufficient to cause unconsciousness.

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Ohio Bill on Euthanasia

Representative Edith Mayer (R. Cincinnati) has introduced a bill into the Ohio legislature which would prohibit the use of any high altitude decompression chambers to euthanize dogs or cats. The decompression chamber works by removing air from an enclosed space with a vacuum pump, simulating a rapid ascent to an altitude of 55,000 feet. The low air pressure produces hypoxia, which results in unconsciousness and finally, death.

According to a report compiled by The Humane Society of the United States’ Department of Animal Sheltering and Control (Report on HB 584, 1979), euthanasia by decompression is neither practical nor humane. Animals may experience severe physiological damage prior to losing consciousness during the decompression-recompression cycle. Damage can occur when infection of the upper respiratory tract (often the reason for destroying the animal) prevents pressure equalization in the middle ear. Abdominal pain may also arise from the expansion of trapped gases in the intestinal tract.
Another problem cited in the report concerns the age of animals at the time of euthanasia. A substantial number of the animals euthanized at shelters and pounds are kittens and puppies. Young animals, with their greater tolerance for oxygen deprivation, have been known to survive the decompression chamber and emerge with incapacity of the chamber as well as the inevitable troubles which occur with any mechanical device present. Additional practical disadvantages.

Eight states (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts and Virginia) have banned decompression chambers and the affected shelters are now using methods such as sodium pentobarbitol injection or filtered carbon monoxide poisoning. The use of barbiturates, in particular, compares favorably in cost to the high altitude decompression chamber, requires no mechanical maintenance and is effective regardless of the animal's age or physical condition.

The Ohio Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA) has not taken an official stand on the bill. However, OVMA Executive Secretary Gene King said that the association has "periodically reaffirmed" its agreement with the American Veterinary Medical Association's guidelines on euthanasia. The latest report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia states that although rapid decompression is a satisfactory procedure for euthanasia under ideal conditions..." Because many difficulties have arisen in using decompression and because there is a general lack of understanding of how hypoxia affects animals, other methods of euthanasia are preferable." (JAVMA 173:59-72, 1978).

Hearings on the bill began in January 1980.

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