



Preparing cattle for slaughter

Agriculture Information Sheet No 34

This information sheet provides general advice for farmers on how to keep cattle clean, reducing the need to clip them. It also includes more specific advice on reducing the risks to humans from clipping cattle where necessary. Farmers should note there is no legal requirement for cattle to be clipped: the requirement is to produce clean cattle for slaughter.

Farmers must ensure that cattle they send to the abattoir are in one of the two acceptable cleanliness categories set by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), which enforces hygiene standards at abattoirs. Research has shown that the dirtier the hide, the greater the potential for carcass contamination with bacteria such as *E coli O157*. MHS has made it clear they will reject dirty animals sent to the abattoir, with resulting costs to the farmer. To achieve the necessary standards, farmers may need to:

- change their cattle production practices;
- improve housing and transport arrangements;
- clip the lower parts of the animals before sending them to the abattoir.

The law

Following the advice in this information sheet will help you comply with the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. These require that the risks from work activities are assessed and controlled so far as reasonably practicable.

The risks

Handling any large animal inevitably involves a risk to the handler of injury from crushing, kicking or butting. The risk is increased if the work involves animals that have not been handled frequently. The risk may be even greater if it is necessary to work on the underside of the animals, eg to clip the hair on the belly, an operation with which they will not be familiar. HSE and the farming unions have received a number of reports of injury to the face or arm from kicking during belly clipping.

Controlling the risks using husbandry techniques

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has produced advice on the husbandry systems farmers can adopt to keep cattle clean (*Clean beef cattle for slaughter - A guide for farmers*, available free from FSA Publication Centre, Tel: 0845 6060667 or the ADAS website at www.adas.co.uk/cleanlivestock). Putting these systems in place will reduce the need to clean cattle before they leave the farm.

FSA advises that farmers consider husbandry aspects such as:

- finishing cattle at grass. Infection with gastro-intestinal worms, grazing young, lush grass or using excessive nitrogen fertiliser can all result in animals becoming loose and dirty. Planning fertiliser use and parasite control programmes, providing straw when stock are on lush grazing, and moving ring and creep feeders to avoid muddiness will help reduce the incidence of dirty animals. In extreme cases you may need to house the animals before slaughter;
- diet. Silage- or root-based diets, especially when supplemented with cereals, result in large quantities of wet dung. Well-made silage, used in a balanced diet, with free access to straw (or with chopped straw in the ration) will reduce the problem. Hay- and cereal-based diets will normally result in dry dung with little soiling;
- housing. Slatted yards can produce clean cattle if they are properly managed, with the correct stocking rate at all stages of growth, and the use of straw-bedded marketing yards where necessary. Straw yards also require good management to produce clean cattle. Make sure your cattle housing meets DEFRA recommendations on ventilation, drainage and aspect;
- the general health of your cattle. A good preventive health programme will reduce the risk of cattle suffering disorders or carrying pathogenic organisms which could not only lead to scouring, but also to human food poisoning;
- using a marketing yard for a time before slaughter - for a few days if the animals are wet or only slightly dirty or for up to several weeks for dirtier animals. The yard should have ample, good quality straw bedding and sufficient space allowance.

Controlling the risks by clipping cattle

Even with good husbandry practices, from time to time you may have to clip parts of your cattle before presenting them for slaughter. If you do, you will need to take precautions to help control the risk of injury.

The main hazards are crushing when you move the animal from the pen to the crush, and kicking when you access the underside of the animal to clip it. Clipping should only be carried out using properly designed handling equipment and safe working techniques. It is therefore essential that you assess the suitability of your

cattle-handling facilities and the need for any modifications to their design, and to working methods or tools. There is also the hazard of electrocution when you use the trimmer, but that is not covered by this sheet.

Remember that:

- some cattle will be semi-wild and not used to being handled;
- you cannot safely clip the belly of an animal in a crush with enclosed and fixed bottom sides, or which has permanently fixed vertical or horizontal bars close to the belly area of the animal;
- the flanks and legs can be clipped in relative safety standing up and behind the animal, but belly clipping will always involve work forward of, and close to, the rear legs.

Unless your handling system meets the criteria in this information sheet, or equivalent standards, you will risk serious injury. For the race, check that:

- the animals can readily enter the funnel end;
- they can see clearly to the crush and beyond, so that they will willingly move along the race;
- the sides of the race are properly secured to the ground and to each other;
- you can contain the lead animal in the race while it waits its turn in the crush. Hinged or sliding doors are suitable, but be sure they are operated from the working side of the race so the operator does not have to reach across it to close the gate.

For the crush check that:

- you can fully open the bottom half of the sides of the crush;
- there are no permanent vertical bars when the doors are open which could allow the operator's hand to be trapped if the animal kicks;
- both sides of the crush open, and that you have enough room along each side of the crush to work safely. If not you will have to reach right underneath the animal - this is **not** a safe practice;
- the animal's head will be firmly held in the locking front gate - ideally this will be self-locking;

- you always use a rump rail or bar to minimise the forward and backward movement of the animal;
- the crush is secured to the ground or, if mobile, to a vehicle;
- the animal will be adequately restrained from kicking - consider whether you should use an anti-kicking device;
- you can avoid stretching too far from one position during clipping as this will result in your head moving down and in towards the animal;
- you can work facing towards the front of the animal as this will help prevent you leaning into the direction of any kick.

Anti-kicking devices

There are a number of devices on the market which are designed to minimise an animal's freedom to kick. These include horizontal anti-kicking bars, which can typically be swung and locked in position, and anti-kicking aprons, which are tensioned in front of the back legs. The experience of farmers who have used these devices suggests that they can work well. Whatever devices are used, however, the animal must be fully restrained at the head and rear.

Further information

HSE priced and free publications are available by mail order from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995 Website: www.hsebooks.co.uk (HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops and free leaflets can be downloaded from HSE's website: www.hse.gov.uk.)

For information about health and safety ring HSE's Infoline Tel: 08701 545500 Fax: 02920 859260 e-mail: hseinformationservices@natbrit.com or write to HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG.

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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