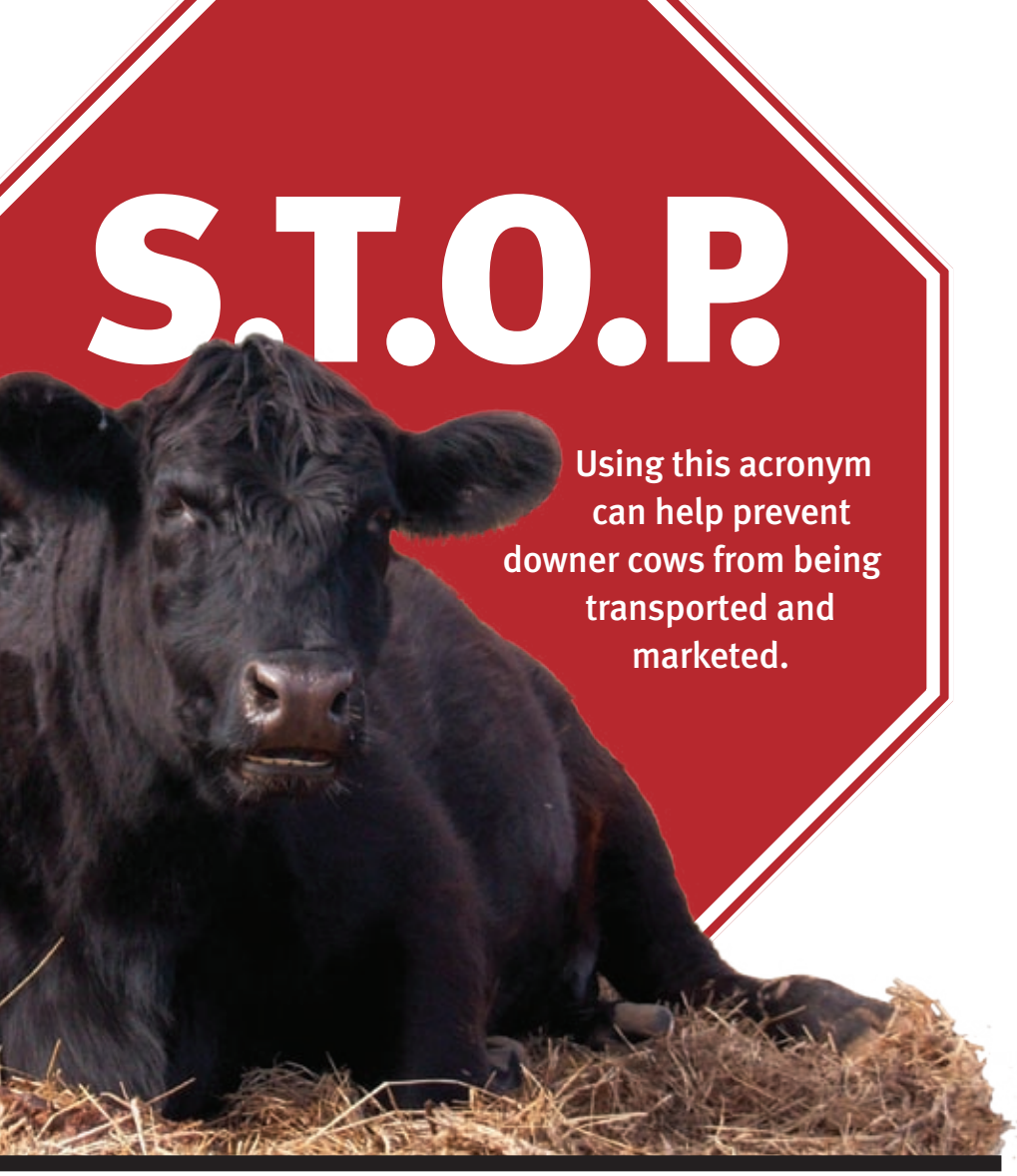
# S.T.O.P.



**Using this acronym can help prevent downer cows from being transported and marketed.**

*by* ***Kindra Gordon***

Defined as an animal that is unable to stand or walk unassisted, downer cattle have become a major animal welfare issue facing the livestock industry. Video footage of these animals being dragged or treated inhumanely has created a zero tolerance attitude among the public — and several states are considering or implementing legislation that makes such actions illegal.

Carolyn Stull, an animal welfare Extension specialist with the University of California (UC)–Davis, reports that in California legislation was put in place after the Westland-Hallmark cattle abuse case making it a felony to push or drag a downer (or nonambulatory) animal. She says legislation is also proposed that would create an Animal Abuse Registry in California so anyone accused of animal abuse would be listed in a publicly available registry.

With that type of legal action gaining momentum, Stull stresses the importance of humanely handling downer animals in the livestock industry — and she believes it starts by being proactive. Stull says that by taking the time to identify potential downer candidates, the number of downer animals transported and taken to market can be reduced.

## ID downer candidates

Stull and her UC-Davis colleagues say before you load out a group of cull cows, you should STOP.

STOP is actually an acronym to help identify possible downer cows and prevent them from going to packing plants. Animals with any of the following conditions should not be transported or marketed:

**Sick** — cows with a fever greater than 103° F, or drug residues from treatment for a sickness

**Thin** — cows with a body condition score of less than 2.0

**Ocular** — cows with cancer eye or that are blind in both eyes

**Pain** — cows with fractures, lameness, peritonitis

Stull says for animals with severe pain, poor recovery prognosis, fractures or that have been down (unable to stand) for 6-12 hours, "immediate" on-farm euthanasia should be considered.

"Downer cows are a medical emergency," she emphasizes. "Every hour they remain down and on concrete decreases their chances of ever getting up." And, she adds, if downed cows cannot be cared for humanely, they need to be euthanized. She recommends working with your local veterinarian or getting appropriate training for yourself and/or your employees so animals can be euthanized in a timely manner.

## Caring for downers

Stull reports that the primary causes of downer cows in the beef and dairy industries are calving paralysis, mastitis, injury and milk fever. Thus, many downers can be prevented through management — preventing slips and falls caused by crowding or moving animals too quickly, making sure facilities are safe with nonslip flooring, and using calving-ease sires or assisting with calving when needed.

When a downer does occur, the animal should be carefully moved to a recovery area, away from the herd. Stull reports that an animal that lies in one position for 6-12 hours may cause permanent pressure damage to nerve and muscle tissue — and have little chance for recovery.

The recovery area should provide shelter from the sun and wind, and deep bedding.

"Bedding is a big factor influencing if a cow will get up or not," Stull says, adding 12 in. of sand seems to be best as it helps minimize muscle and nerve damage, provides traction and secure footing, and decreases sores and urine scalding.

When moving a downed animal to a recovery area, Stull stresses that the animal

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should not be dragged. The animal should be moved carefully with a sled, sling or front-end loader. Similarly, calves that cannot walk should not be dragged or pulled by their ears or tails.

"It's not acceptable," Stull says. To move the calf with minimal stress it should be carried or placed in a wheelbarrow.

Downed animals must also be offered feed and water that is accessible. "A downed animal cannot drink out of a 5-gallon pail," Stull says. Feed and water pans that are cut low enough so a cow can access them without tipping them over should be used. A cow can drink 20-40 gallons of water per day, so the water should be refilled frequently.

The downer animal should be examined immediately so a recovery prognosis can be made. Stull notes that if the prognosis is poor, the animal should be euthanized immediately.

Animals that have a chance for recovery will require frequent physical therapy. For instance, an animal that is lying flat will bloat and needs to be propped up to the sternal position, and then the animal's weight should be shifted from side to side every two to three hours to prevent nerve or muscle damage (crush syndrome). Slings and well-padded hip lifters can be useful in helping cows stand for 10-15 minutes at a time. Flotation tanks have also been shown to be successful in rehabilitation.

"Lots of labor goes into these methods, but the quality of nursing care given to the cows is a major determinant for successful recovery," Stull notes.

Downer cows should be assessed daily for their ability to stand and bear weight. If their prognosis is not improving, Stull says it's important to have an on-farm euthanasia plan in place so the animals do not suffer.

Stull reiterates that many downers can be prevented if the STOP acronym is used prior to transporting and marketing animals. The only animals that should be transported should walk easily, be healthy with no medication residues, and have a body condition score of 2.0 or better.

Stull was one of the presenters at the 2010 International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare that was presented in Manhattan, Kan., by the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute. For more information about the symposium, visit *www.isbcw.beefcattleinstitute.org/*. For Angus Productions Inc.'s (API's) full coverage of the event, visit *www.api-virtuallibrary.com/meetings_other_news.html.*

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