

The AVMA and the Panel on Euthanasia: Key Updates

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ABSTRACT: Committees, councils, task forces and similar groups guide the development of policy for the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and comprise volunteers with topic- and species-specific expertise. The Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) oversees the Panel on Euthanasia (POE), which creates the AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals (Guidelines).

Although the Guidelines are intended as a reference for veterinarians in the United States, they are recognized as a gold standard by organizations around the world and are prominent in state and federal regulatory frameworks. The Guidelines undergo a major update at least every decade. Recognizing that science and social expectations surrounding euthanasia are increasing in complexity, the process for compiling the 2013 update was substantially changed to include more breadth and depth of expertise in the affected species and environments in which euthanasia is performed. A collaborative effort among three methods-based (physical, inhalant, and noninhalant agents) and nine taxonomic-based working groups resulted in more than 60 professionals contributing their multi-disciplinary expertise. Comments on a final draft were sought from AVMA members, other professional associations, and appropriate governmental agencies (all of which counted wildlife professionals among their mix) to maximize the document's accuracy and utility. In addition, the POE continues to exist as a virtual advisory body to the AWC to ensure that expertise is readily available when questions and new information are considered during the period between major updates. Less extensive interim updates to the Guidelines are accommodated via a "living" electronic document. Conceptual changes associated with the 2013 update include identifying differences in the purpose and circumstances of killing associated with euthanasia, depopulation and slaughter; this led to the development of separate guidelines for each of these processes. In addition, "conditionally acceptable" methods for euthanasia have been clarified to be equivalent to "acceptable" methods when certain conditions are met. This ensures such methods are not regarded as inferior, but instead are recognized as requiring specific expertise, equipment or environments.

Several conceptual changes are associated with the 2013 update that will increase the degree of flexibility and use of professional judgment for wildlife settings, as compared to earlier versions of the POE. The 2013 Guidelines acknowledge there may be times when killing methods that do not meet the definition of euthanasia may need to be applied (e.g., pest control), and has established the category of "humane killing" to accommodate these situations. The POE recognized that wildlife management is fraught with such challenges, and clarified that selecting the best method for the situation is required, regardless of whether the method is labeled "euthanasia", "humane killing", or "pest control". In general, the document was written to allow some flexibility and encourage the use of professional judgment in addressing the diversity of situations that may arise.

The Guidelines are available for free downloads at:
https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Euthanasia-Guidelines.aspx?utm_source=prettyurl&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=redirect&utm_keyword=issue-animal_welfare-euthanasia-pdf. The Guidelines will be intermittently updated, as new information becomes available. Consequently, the website and the list of revisions should be periodically checked to ensure that outdated information is not cited in protocols, proposals, or other documents. Additional AVMA policies (<https://www.avma.org/kb/resources/reference/animalwelfare/pages/animal-welfare-policy-statements.aspx>) and backgrounders (<https://www.avma.org/kb/resources/reference/animalwelfare/pages/animal-welfare-backgrounders.aspx>) are available for review.

Key Words: AVMA, euthanasia, guidelines

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