FACT SHEET:

Depopulation

BACKGROUND

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Mass culling, or depopulation, can be required when livestock are impacted by communicable disease, involved in natural disasters, like fire, flooding, or barn collapse, or injured in motor vehicle accidents in transit.

Farmers may carry out culling themselves, with neighbours who are also certified to cull livestock, or they may need to source and hire a depopulation service like full-barn gassing. Farmers may also need to hire licensed deadstock operators to dispose of dead farm animals (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness, 2025).

These events are often emotionally distressing or even traumatic for farmers and their families.

This fact sheet has been designed to complement the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing's (CCAW) Response Toolkit for Agricultural Crises.

Find the Toolkit and other crisis-specific fact sheets on the CCAW website.

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR AGRICULTURAL WELLBEING

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DISEASE OUTBREAKS

Depopulation is often necessary to stop the spread of communicable disease.

As of 2025, there are 51 federally reportable diseases in Canada that animal owners, veterinarians, and laboratories are required to report to a Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) veterinarian immediately when detected on a farm (Department of Justice, 2014). These include Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, Bovine Tuberculosis, Chronic Wasting Disease, Cysticercosis, Equine Infectious Anemia, and Newcastle Disease, all of which were found in Canada in 2025 (CFIA, 2025c) .

Depopulation may be ordered by the CFIA immediately upon confirmation of disease and may occur within 48-72 hours of detection of disease (CFIA, 2025b).

The CFIA may have a strong presence on the farm after discovery of disease, which can lead to farmers feeling a loss of control over their farm operations. CFIA veterinarians work with the impacted farmers to explain the required procedures (for example, quarantining, testing, depopulating, environmental contamination assessment) (CFIA, 2025d).

Farmers have reported distrust and frustration with authorities who come to the farm during the depopulation process (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025). They may wish for additional support from someone outside of the CFIA to navigate the process.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Farmers will work with their veterinarians to determine the best strategy for animal welfare during a natural disaster. Depopulation may be the most humane option in some circumstances, for example, if animals cannot be removed from harm's way, and/or to prevent or relieve animal suffering (American Association of Avian Pathologists, 2021).

During natural disasters, farm buildings may be damaged to an extent where it is not safe for farm personnel to enter them, and essential services (such as animal care and feeding) may not be able to be restored in a reasonable amount of time (American Association of Avian Pathologists, 2021).

Impacts on Farms and Farmers

Depopulation can have wide-ranging impacts on farms across Canada. Specific impacts of depopulation as it relates to farmers wellbeing and livelihoods are described below.

Financial Impacts

- Depopulation poses a significant economic burden to farmers – losses are often abrupt, and recovery may require high upfront costs (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025).
- It may be emotionally distressing to farmers when insurance claims are unexpectedly denied, or when there are disparities between what farmers believe they have insurance coverage for and what they are covered for.
- The farmers we interviewed who had experienced these events strongly encouraged all farmers to prevent distress by confirming their insurance policies are up-to-date and ensuring a deep understanding of their insurance policies.

Disease Outbreaks

- Farmers may receive compensation for: the (disease-free) market value of the impacted animals, transportation costs involved in the depopulation process, personal labour, and equipment/materials that were also ordered to be destroyed by the CFIA, such as feed, cages, crates, troughs, freezers and refrigerators (CFIA, 2025a).
- Importantly, the farmer must submit the required documentation to receive compensation, and it may take 6 to 8 weeks for payment to be received by the farmer (CFIA, 2025a).

Natural Disasters

- Farmers should ensure their private insurance policies cover business interruption, compensation for livestock lost to the event, livestock required to be culled following the event, and all associated costs including veterinary services and disposal.
- Large-scale disasters may be eligible for some additional compensation, however, these AgriRecovery initiatives are created for individual events, and often take weeks to months for farmers to complete their applications and receive compensation (AAFC, 2018; AAFC, 2025).

Social and Familial Impacts

- The children of farmers may have difficulty understanding why depopulation is necessary and explaining depopulation to their friends or at school (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025).
- Farmers may be concerned about being perceived as a "bad farmer" from their peers (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025). Additionally, farmers may worry about the possibility of animal rights activists trespassing onto the farm in an event requiring depopulation.
- Farms in open or high-traffic areas (for example, near a highway) may be particularly prone to public scrutiny during a depopulation event.
- Farmers should be supported in ensuring they have the appropriate documentation to prevent the public from entering their properties, and in navigating media relations. Many commodity groups provide recommendations for responding to the media during an emergency which should be consulted (Ontario Pork, 2023).

Mental Health Impacts

- Farmers who experience depopulation have reported emotional distress, including feelings of shock, helplessness, shame, guilt, overwhelm, and devastation (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025).
- Emotional distress may stem from the loss of farmers' connections to their animals, loss of time and effort spent breeding the herd, loss of finances, and worry about the future of their operations, among other factors (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025).
- Farmers may experience anxiety throughout the process and may become overly cautious about preventing disease on their farm following depopulation (Purc-Stephenson & Doctor, 2025).
- Some farmers may blame themselves for the event or not being able to fulfill their responsibility to raise healthy animals, even if nothing could have been done differently to prevent the event from happening (Hood & Seedsman, 2004; Noller et al., 2022).
- Some farmers may also have a traumatic response to depopulation. Farmers have scored more severely on measures of depression and have exhibited symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following an event requiring depopulation (Goldberg, 1972; Olff et al., 2005; Thurston et al., 2017).
- The emotional distress caused by depopulation may contribute to farmers' decisions to exit farming following the event (Kadowaki et al., 2016).

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