

Brief Summary of Animal Euthanasia

The word euthanasia has its origin in the Greek language and means “good death.” Euthanasia is defined as being an act of either killing or permitting the death of a terminally ill or hopelessly injured individual or animal by using a humane, painless method for reasons of mercy. Whereas euthanasia of humans has historically been prohibited, euthanasia of animals is not an emergence of the present age, but has been performed for centuries. In ancient Egypt, it was not uncommon that at the owner’s death, if his pet was still alive, the pet would be euthanized to be reunited with its owner, so the pet could continue to be the deceased’s companion in the afterlife. Even though the numbers for the euthanasia of animals is still high, euthanasia of dogs and cats have declined since 1970. The exact number of animals euthanized is difficult to determine since animal shelters are not obligated to keep statistics about euthanizing animals; so numbers are often based on voluntary surveys conducted in shelters.

Most states have enacted laws dealing with animal euthanasia, detailing the euthanasia methods allowed and who may perform euthanasia. Mostly professionals like licensed veterinarians or trained and certified technicians may perform euthanasia. Such technicians must complete a specified number of hours of training before being allowed to euthanize animals. Some states allow non-certified animal shelter employees to perform the euthanasia of animals without extensive training. Some states allow for “emergency” euthanasia, permitted by law enforcement officers, animal control agents, veterinarians, or other designated persons. Emergency euthanasia may be performed by shooting the animal.

In regards to euthanasia methods, the legislature seeks advice from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) guidelines. The AVMA declared euthanasia through injection of sodium pentobarbital as the most humane method to euthanize an animal. Permissions for handling and possession of the chemicals required to administer euthanasia are mandatory. Such permission requirements do not just refer to veterinary clinics, but also to animal shelters, animal control agencies, and humane societies. Some states require that either a licensed veterinarian or a certified euthanasia technician is among the staff in order to receive a permit. The AVMA’s guidelines on euthanasia still allow the usage gas chambers to euthanize animals under certain circumstances. Twenty-three states currently have no ban on using gas chambers to euthanize dogs or cats. Four states are banning carbon monoxide (CO) but do not ban the use of carbon dioxide (CO₂). The AVMA guidelines also condemn the use of household chemicals, cleaning agents, disinfectants, or pesticides as unacceptable euthanasia agents as well as hypothermia and drowning.

Requests for euthanasia may come from animal owners, animal shelters, or even the government. The reasons for animal euthanasia differ based on the perspective of who is requesting it. The majority of dog or cat owners state either terminal illness, behavioral issues like aggression, or age as the main reason to ask for euthanasia of their beloved pet. Shelters may claim overcrowding, behavioral issues, unadoptable, or financial issues to justify animal euthanasia. Even so called “no kill” shelters do euthanize animals for the same reasons as regular shelters. “No kill” shelters may euthanize up to 10% of its animal population, while still maintaining the characterization of a “no kill” shelter.

State laws differ in regulating euthanasia of animals with some states having enacted detailed laws describing the permitted method to be used, while other states do not directly regulate euthanasia or have not passed any law in regards to the method and circumstances involving euthanasia of animals. Enactment of new animal regulations have not come to a halt. During the past couple of years, some states have passed new laws, finalized, or proposed new regulations. However, research has shown that preventative measures work best to decrease the incidence of non-medically necessary animal euthanasia.