

# What Do We Know About Cull Cows in Canada?



Canadian dairy herds typically remove around 30% of their herd each year. In 2017, approximately 184,000 cows were culled from dairy farms in Canada enrolled in Dairy Herd Improvement (DHI).

Culling is an inevitable and often difficult decision for dairy farmers. They are committed to doing what's best for their cows and their operations. Many of these animals were culled due to low productivity and an inability to get pregnant, however, some were culled due to compromised health.

Research conducted in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia suggests that a number of cull cows arrive to auction in poor condition. These studies also show that cattle arriving with poor health sell for a reduced overall price. This is an important issue for dairy farmers and their animals. Let's look at what we know about cull cows in Canada.

## Compromised and Unfit Animals

### What is a Compromised Animal?

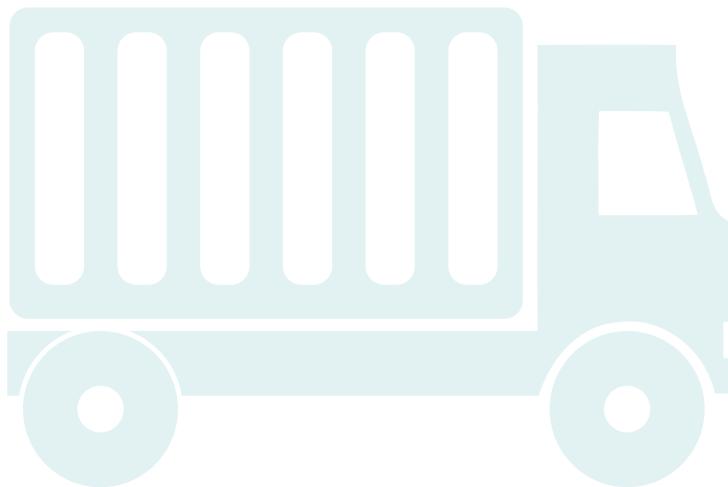
The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) defines a compromised animal as "*an animal with reduced capacity to withstand transportation but where transportation with special provisions will not lead to undue suffering*".

These animals can only leave the farm if they are given special provisions (e.g. their own space at the back of the truck, ample bedding, slaughter at local facilities, short transportation times) **and they should not be sent to auction — they must go directly to slaughter or be humanely euthanized.**

### What is an Unfit Animal?

The CFIA defines an unfit animal as "*an animal with reduced capacity to withstand transportation and where there is a high risk that transportation will lead to undue suffering*".

These animals should never be transported off the farm as doing so would cause suffering. Often the most humane outcome for these animals is euthanasia.



### Transporting with "Special Provisions"

This CFIA term means that these animals need to be transported more carefully than usual. When transporting compromised animals (e.g. thin, weak cows):

- They should be shipped in their own compartment or with a familiar companion
- They should be loaded last and unloaded first
- You should use extra bedding to allow them to lie down and rest

### Specific Areas of Concern in the Dairy Industry

Research has shown that some animals still arrive at auction or for slaughter with one or more of the following conditions:

#### In heavy lactation

**Thin**  
body condition score (BCS) of 2 or less out of 5

**Moderate to severely lame**

**Severely injured/swollen limbs**

**Exhibiting signs of severe respiratory disease**

# State of the Union: What Does the Research Say?

A number of Canadian and American researchers have looked at the conditions of cull cows arriving at sales or abattoirs.

These studies, which have taken place across Canada, have shown that more than 20% of cows arrive with serious health conditions that make them unfit for transport. The condition of cull cows is an issue from coast to coast.

In 2018, Alberta Farm Animal Care conducted a project, supported by Alberta Milk, to evaluate the condition of beef and dairy cattle transported in the province. Cattle condition was evaluated at auction markets, as well as provincial and federal abattoirs. **The table below summarizes the results from Alberta. However, all Canadian provinces face similar issues with cull cows.**

		Scope of the problem	
Condition	What To Watch For	Auction Markets	Provincial Abattoirs
Lame Cattle	<p>Cows with lameness scores ≥ 3.</p> <p><b>Compromised animals:</b></p> <p><b>Score 3   Slightly Lame</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Movement looks imperfect</li><li>A slight limp is evident</li></ul> <p><b>Unfit animals   Severely lame</b></p> <p><b>Score 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Arched back when standing and walking</li><li>The animal's head bobs and she has a severe limp (but is still bearing weight)</li></ul> <p><b>Score 5</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Cannot bear weight on one or more limbs</li><li>Reluctant to walk or even get up</li></ul>	<p><b>73%</b> of animals arriving at auction markets arrived sound (no signs of lameness) or slightly lame (score 3)</p>	<p><b>42%</b> of dairy animals sent to provincial abattoirs were slightly lame (score of 3). This is the appropriate channel for these animals</p> <p><b>91%</b> of animals arrived at provincial abattoirs with a lameness score of 3 or less. Severely lame animals are unfit for transport</p>
Heavily Lactating Cattle	Those animals that require regular milking.	<p><b>64%</b> of animals sold at auction markets were dried off before transport or not lactating; this is an area that farmers can focus on</p>	<p><b>75%</b> of dairy animals were in an appropriate production stage for transport</p>
Thin Dairy Cattle	<p>Those animals with a body condition score (<b>BCS</b>) &lt; 2 are defined as emaciated or extremely skinny.</p> <p><b>Emaciation (BCS &lt; 1.5):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Short ribs project sharply like a shelf</li><li>Top vertebrae (spine) are very prominent</li><li>Sharp hook and pins</li><li>Area around tail head very sunken</li><li>Ligament from pin to spine is well defined</li></ul>	<p><b>74%</b> of animals arrived with a BCS &gt; 2</p>	<p><b>75%</b> of animals arrived with a BCS &gt; 2. The remaining 25% were considered compromised (BCS between 1.5 and 2). These BCS scores are appropriate for direct slaughter.</p> <p><b>83%</b> of animals sent here were fit for transport; this is an opportunity for improvement and a welfare concern</p>

# The Many Rigours of the Road

We know that it is common for mature cull dairy cattle to be purchased at auction and transported to another market for resale.

**Even with the best of intentions, animals are often not sent directly to slaughter.**

When this happens, there are a number of stressors that they're exposed to:

- Mixing with unknown animals multiple times
- A variety of chutes and ramps to navigate
- Being loaded and pushed by other animals
- Many may fall and be stepped on
- Transportation facing a variety of environmental extremes, starts, stops

## The Bottom Line

These are just a few of the stressors animals face. You can imagine — even the most sound and healthy animals could have a tough time coping. If a cow was lame or thin or sick to begin with, the chances of further suffering and deterioration are quite high.

## What Should You Do?

Condition	Why it's a Concern	What You Should Do
Lame Cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lame cows cannot handle the stresses of transport</li><li>• Their condition has a higher chance of worsening relative to sound animals</li><li>• They have a much greater chance of becoming a downer cow</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify lame cows early and ship them directly to slaughter OR treat them until fit enough for transport</li><li>• Know your options for unplanned culling</li><li>• Develop an SOP for the situation and stick to it</li></ul>
Heavily Lactating Cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sales markets are not typically equipped to milk cows</li><li>• When left unmilked:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The udder will distend causing pain, potential injury, and movement issues</li><li>○ Milk could leak and increase chances of mastitis</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify cull cows in advance and dry off</li><li>• Know your options when shipping is unplanned</li></ul> <p><b>Ask yourself:</b></p> <p><i>"Do I know I'm going to ship that cow at some point during her lactation?"</i></p> <p><b>If yes, start planning.</b></p>
Thin Dairy Cattle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cows with BCS &lt; 2 are unfit for transport</li><li>• They are usually weak with little body fat reserves and less muscle mass</li><li>• These animals cannot deal with the stresses of transport or withdrawal of feed/water for extended periods</li><li>• They have a much greater chance of</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cull thin cows as early as possible</li><li>• Catch them before extreme emaciation so they are able to go direct to slaughter</li><li>• Regularly assess herd's condition</li><li>• <b>Critically evaluate every animal before culling</b></li></ul>



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