

RESOLUTION #—_____2023

Regular Winter Session

Submitted by Gail R. Hansen, DVM, MPH

TITLE: Addressing the Use of Heatstroke as Method of Killing Millions of Animals

RESOLVED, that the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) issue an interim re-classification of heatstroke-based depopulation methods (VSD, VSD Plus Heat, and VSD Plus High Temperature and Humidity) as “Not Recommended” for both poultry and pigs pending additional scientific review by the Panel on Depopulation as they revise the *2019 AVMA Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals*, and that the AVMA lead efforts to eliminate the widespread use of heatstroke as a method of killing veterinary patients.

Statement About the Resolution:

Ventilation shutdown (VSD) is the cessation of natural or mechanical ventilation of atmospheric air in a building where animals are housed. VSD, VSD Plus Heat (VSD+H) and VSD Plus High Temperature and Humidity (VSD+TH) cause death via hyperthermia, or heatstroke.¹⁻⁴

Practitioners in virtually all fields of veterinary medicine understand that killing by heatstroke does not provide the humane death required for our patients and endorsed by the AVMA Animal Welfare Principles.⁵ The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) does not recognize heatstroke-based methods in its recommendations for killing animals for disease control-associated depopulation,⁶ and such methods have been internationally condemned due to their profoundly negative impact on animal welfare.^{7,8}

In July 2021, the House of Delegates voted to refer Resolution #8 to reclassify VSD+ as “not recommended” to the AVMA Board of Directors with a recommendation to refer the proposal to the AVMA Panel on Depopulation. Although the Board of Directors approved this recommendation soon after, an AVMA representative announced in June 2022 that work related to the Resolution had not yet begun.

This prolonged delay is at least partly responsible for VSD+Heat rapidly becoming the predominant depopulation method used on commercial poultry operations in response to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Between February and August 2022, over 9 million birds perished in HPAI-related depopulations in which VSD+Heat was the sole method used.^{9,10} Over 27 million additional birds died in depopulations in which VSD+Heat was one of multiple depopulation methods used at a single location. Only about 4 million birds (about 10%) were killed in depopulations in which VSD+Heat was *not* used.

Reclassifying all methods of depopulation that rely on heatstroke as their killing mechanism as “Not Recommended” would help stop their routine use while encouraging the adoption of more humane methods of depopulation or mass euthanasia, some of which are currently not described in the *Guidelines* despite being used in other countries.¹¹ Producers who depopulate flocks or herds for disease control purposes receive taxpayer-funded compensation only when they use methods that comply with the AVMA *Guidelines*.¹² Unfortunately, during the 2022 HPAI outbreak, simply having a large flock is cited as a “constrained circumstance” justifying the use of VSD+Heat; every HPAI-affected operation with more than 216,000 birds has employed VSD+Heat.

Because the *2019 Guidelines* require updates to numerous sections to incorporate research and developments within the field of depopulation, it is understandable that revisions may not be available for some time. However, we now know that inclusion of VSD+ in this document is among the reasons that at least 243,016 of our healthy porcine patients were killed, over the course of up to 2.5 hours, by exposure to temperatures of up to 170°F and humidity exceeding 90%² – conditions severe enough to potentially cause third-degree burns.¹³⁻¹⁵ Moreover, failure of our

professional organization to take any action while tens of millions of our avian patients continue to be intentionally killed by a method that no one argues is humane, is unacceptable. It violates our Veterinary Oath and tarnishes our professional reputation.

Veterinarians are uniquely qualified to lead efforts to decrease the scale and frequency of depopulations and to ensure that animal welfare is adequately protected when depopulation cannot be avoided. Given the increasing number of our patients affected by depopulation, such efforts should become a focus of our profession and our professional organization. At a minimum, the AVMA should promulgate an Interim Reclassification of VSD, VSD+H, and VSD+TH as “Not Recommended,” which would encourage producers and governmental agencies to shift toward more humane depopulation methods while the Panel undertakes more comprehensive revisions to the *Guidelines*.

Financial Impact: None.

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	Board of Directors	House Advisory Committee	Reference Committee #	House of Delegates
Recommend Approval				
Recommend Disapproval				
Recommend Referral to...				
No Recommendation				
Recommend Postpone Indefinitely				
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