

Slaughter of pregnant cattle: prevalence and reasons

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Background: Slaughter of pregnant cattle is common in Denmark, but knowledge on the gestation length at slaughter is not known. Furthermore it is unknown if production-type specific practices influences the reasons for sending pregnant cattle for slaughter.

Animal welfare issues regarding transport and slaughter of pregnant cattle refer to the dam itself, as the fetus is not supposed to register pain, fear or similar. The dam must however, not be transported during the last 1/10 of the gestation – an EU Regulation issued to protect the pregnant dam. The mean gestation length of heifers and cows of the most common dairy breeds in Denmark is 279-283 days. The length, however, varies considerably among breeds and their crosses in general, e.g., Jersey-Limousine crossbred cows have a mean gestation period of 289 days.

Here we report how often pregnant cattle is slaughtered in Denmark, their stage of gestation, and why they were sent for slaughter according to the owners. Data were stratified by age (heifer or cow), and type of production (dairy vs. beef).

Results: Pregnancy status was examined in 812 slaughtered females by palpation and inspection, and if indicated, by incision of the uterus at the slaughter chain. A total of 186 (23%) were found pregnant. Three females (0.4%) were assessed as being at least 253 days pregnant while 39 (5%) were >186 days pregnant (i.e. in the 2nd or 3rd trimester). Gestation day 253 is interesting as this is the border towards the last 1/10 of the gestation (if gestation period = 281 days). The prevalence for slaughtering pregnant bovines was the same for dairy and beef herds. The prevalence of slaughtered heifers vs. cows of dairy breeds was similar, but for beef cattle more pregnant cows (38%) than heifers (15%) were slaughtered.

The slaughtered pregnant females originated from 102 herds of which the owners of 92 were interviewed regarding the reason of culling the animal. For dairy herds, health issues were given as the reason in 70% of the animals, while production issues were the main reason in non-dairy herds. Most managers of dairy herds (n=55, 90%) told that they knew that the animal was pregnant, but this was only the case for 65% (n=20) of non-dairy herd managers. Many herd managers/owners mentioned that they did not like culling pregnant animals but were in a dilemma because of compromised health of the dam. For non-dairy herds it was however clear from the interview, that the manager was unaware of the females' positive pregnancy status as they have been on pasture with a bull, i.e. not bred by purpose. This was in particular the case for heifers, which were not intended for breeding.