

Mortality Management and the Georgia Dead Animal Disposal Act

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Introduction

In Georgia, simple and straightforward rules on mortality disposal and management apply to all livestock and poultry operations, regardless of the size or permit status. These laws also include hobby farms, horse operations, exotic animal breeders and even licensed kennels.

Proper management of mortalities on the farm has implications in nutrient management, flock and herd health, as well as farm family and public health. For this reason you must be familiar with the law and best management practices for dealing with dead animals. The Georgia Department of Agriculture enforces the Georgia Dead Animal Disposal Act.

Unlawful Practices

Abandonment: This practice is ILLEGAL in all its forms, including carcasses abandoned on the surface, in open pits, ditches, water features and sinkholes, or in wells. Though hauling off a carcass to the “back-forty” may have been an acceptable thing to do historically, it has been forbidden since at least 1970 with the passing of the Georgia Dead Animal Disposal Act. This is a misdemeanor that can also carry a fine. Carcasses must be dealt with by an approved method within 24 hours of death or discovery.

Approved Practices

Incineration: This is a very safe method of carcass management from a bio-security stand-

point. This practice is limited to small carcasses, primarily poultry. Incineration must be done in an approved device with air quality and emissions controls. This method is energy intense, and the cost of fuel often makes it economically unfeasible.

Burial: This is probably the most common method of dead animal disposal in Georgia today. If proper procedures are used, this method is safe; the land owner, however, should be aware that certain portions of carcasses can persist for years in an anaerobic environment. During construction projects on former poultry farms, old burial pits have been discovered that contain intact birds.

In many parts of Georgia, high water tables and sandy soils do not allow proper depth or cover of burial without threatening ground water. Burial pits are considered mass graves and, if not managed properly, may pose additional risks to spread disease and contaminate the environment. All burial pits must be approved by the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Burial of individual livestock can be done at the landowner’s discretion as long as the requirements listed on page 3 of this document are met.

Land Filling: Disposing of carcasses at a licensed landfill is considered a method of burial. Land filling may be an option in some areas, but the legality of this will be based on the classification of the facility, local regulations and the policy of the individual site. Even if the landfill is classified to accept carcasses, the management must also grant permission. It is a good idea to have a

written agreement if this method is to be used with any regularity. Even if permission is granted, drawbacks may include additional handling of the mortality, transportation and tipping fees, and breeches of bio-security.

Rendering: Rendering is a heat-driven process that separates waste animal tissue into value-added materials. It is an easy method of mortality management for the farmer and it leaves no lasting legacy on the farm. There are very few rendering facilities in Georgia, however. There can often be fees and charges associated with a rendering service. If a farmer has access to a rendering service, however, and it is affordable, then it is a highly recommended practice.

Weight the cost of rendering against time management, input cost, and possible bio-security breeches when compared to other available methods. Local farmers and your County Extension Agent may be the best resources for determining if this service exists in the area.

Composting: For many species, composting is an environmentally preferable method of dealing with mortalities. When managed correctly, completely composted mortality may be incorporated into existing land application of manures. Much information is available on poultry composting and it is not an uncommon practice. It is also possible to compost larger carcasses. The University of Georgia Swine Center successfully composts larger stock, including sows, and several farms across the state are composting cattle with guidance from Georgia Cooperative Extension and individual permission from the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

Though composting of medium to large carcasses and land applying the material is proving to be feasible, this is NOT currently under consideration for goats and sheep. The prevalence of scrapie, a prion disease, in flocks across Georgia and the United States, poses a biosecurity risk if compost from these animals would be spread on land. This disease is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) similar to BSE (mad cow disease) and the human Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

Technical procedures on composting cattle carcasses are being developed; this appears to be a viable option for the future. Most composting requires storm water protection and covering.

Compost can benefit forest and crop land, but you will need to follow nutrient management guidelines. Contact your local Cooperative Extension office or USDA Service Center for information on composting facilities and best management practices.

Alternative Methods: Alternative methods are not specifically defined. They may include homogenization, digestion or chemical processes and technologies to recover products from mortalities. These must be approved on a case-by-case basis by the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

Catastrophic Mortality Events

Catastrophic events can result from a variety of causes. Examples include a simple act of nature like a storm knocking out ventilation systems, an animal disease outbreak or even intentional agro-terror attacks. A farmer's plan to deal with mortalities during regular operations will likely be inadequate during a major event.

Report all catastrophic events the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Response and assistance may also involve additional agencies including Federal and state emergency management agencies, environmental agencies and public health agencies.

If a catastrophic mortality event is the result of disease outbreak, biosecurity considerations may dictate the method of transportation and disposal. At a minimum, a catastrophic mortality plan for an individual farm should identify a safe location on-site for burial, composting or other approved management technique. The Georgia Department of Agriculture may have additional recommendations and provide assistance on a case-by-case basis. Many state agencies are developing action plans for a variety of scenarios.

Summary

The purpose for mortality disposal is "to prevent the spread of infectious, contagious and communicable diseases." Also, legal implications and requirements are related to nutrient management and the permitting of animal feeding operations. In the nutrient management plan, disposal of operational mortalities and catastrophic mortalities must be defined.

Regardless of the cause of death, carcasses must be disposed of within 24 hours of death or discovery. Approved methods include burial or pits, incineration, rendering, composting, land filling or any method approved by the State Veterinarian.

Summary of Requirements for Dead Animal Disposal

State Authorities

1. Georgia Dead Animal Disposal Act (O.C.G.A. 4-5); passed 1969, amended 2002.
2. Georgia Department Of Agriculture Rules (Chapter 40-13-5) adopted April 1970, amended May 1984, October 1985, and February 2003.

Purpose

“... To prevent the spread of infectious, contagious and communicable diseases from dead animals...”

Definitions

Dead Animals: carcasses, parts of carcasses, fetuses, embryos, effluent or blood of cattle, swine, sheep, goats, poultry, ratites, equine and alternative livestock; animals associated with animal shelters, pet dealers, kennels, and stables, and bird dealers licensed by the Georgia Department of Agriculture; animals processed by commercial facilities that process animals for human consumption and animals associated with wildlife exhibitions.

Violations

- To abandon dead animals on personal, private or public land.
- To dispose of dead animals on another person's property WITHOUT PERMISSION.
- To dispose of dead animals in a city or county landfill without making arrangements with the city or county officials for proper disposal.
- To abandon dead animals in wells or open pits on personal, private or public land.

Time Requirements

- All dead animals must be disposed of within 24 hours of death or discovery.

Methods of Disposal

- **Incineration**
 - Within 24 hours of death or discovery.
 - Entire carcass reduced to ashes.
 - Under conditions approved by U. S. Environmental Protection Agency and Georgia Environmental Protection Division.
- **Burial or Pits**
 - Within 24 hours of death or discovery.
 - No more than 8 feet deep.
 - At least 3 feet below ground level and covered with at least 3 feet of earth on top.
 - At least 100 feet from wells, streams, sink holes or wetlands and at least 15 feet from an embankment slope of moderate grade.
 - Soils must be of slow to moderate permeability.
 - Burial pits (mass grave) must have site approved prior to construction.
- **Rendering**
 - Within 24 hours of death or discovery.
 - Longer than 24 hours if carcasses preserved by refrigeration or freezing.
- **Composting**
 - Approved by State Veterinarian.
 - According to U. S. Natural Resources Conservation Service standards or equivalent.
- **Other Methods**
 - Approved by State Veterinarian on a case-by-case basis.
 - Risk assessment for disease spread conducted by Georgia Department of Agriculture personnel.
 - Specific procedures may be required by the Georgia Department of Agriculture if death due to infectious, contagious, or communicable disease.
- **Transportation on Public Roads**
 - Must be in covered, leak-proof containers.
 - Specific procedures may be required by the Georgia Department of Agriculture if death due to infectious, contagious, or communicable disease.

Penalty for Violations

- Administrative Hearing
- Fine up to \$1,000 per violation
- Consent Order by the Commissioner of Agriculture
- Guilty of a misdemeanor

Important Contacts

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension

Local County Offices: (800) ASK-UGA1
www.caes.uga.edu/extension

Department Biological and Agricultural Engineering

(706) 542-3086, www.ugaengineering.org

Department of Animal and Dairy Science

(706) 542-2581, www.ads.uga.edu

Georgia Department of Agriculture

Livestock and Poultry Field Forces:
(404) 656-3665, www.agr.georgia.gov



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J. Scott Angle, Dean and Director