

Cleaner cattle and sheep

Standards for acceptable and unacceptable levels of cleanliness for cattle and sheep that are slaughtered.

The Clean Livestock Policy aims to ensure a consistent approach to categorisation of animals presented for slaughter and to minimise the risk of food poisoning caused by bacteria on dirty coats and fleeces of cattle and sheep.

It was published in September 1997 by the then Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) to improve hygiene standards following the fatal E.Coli O157 outbreak in Scotland in 1996.

Excrement and mud on coats or fleeces - especially wet ones - can potentially contaminate meat inside the slaughterhouse when the coat or fleece is being removed.

Inspection

Animals should be inspected by food business operators at slaughterhouses to ensure they are clean.

Any slaughterhouses which have an unacceptable risk of contamination can not be accepted for slaughtering animals for human consumption unless they have been cleaned beforehand.

Our operational staff carry out verification checks of operator procedures at the ante-mortem stage.

To prevent the contamination of meat and reduce risks to public health, we will reject any animal for slaughter that does not meet the required standard of cleanliness.

The criteria for identifying the cleanliness of cattle and sheep is separated into five categories, ranging from clean and dry to filthy and wet.

Only livestock in categories one and two could proceed to slaughter for human consumption without further action being taken.

Categories one and two include:

- clean and dry
- slightly dirty
- dry or damp

Hygiene regulations

Following the application of the [2006 Food Hygiene Regulations](#), the responsibility for the production of safe food lies with the food business operator.

All food business operators are required to put in place appropriate controls that demonstrate they are managing food safety within their business.

This includes cleanliness of animals at slaughter. Food business operators rearing animals are also required to, as far as possible, ensure the cleanliness of animals going to slaughter.

Clean cattle

Livestock may carry pathogens - Bacteria live on coats and in the digestive tracts and faeces of healthy animals.

The Clean Livestock Policy has improved cattle cleanliness - it has resulted in an improvement in the visible cleanliness of animals being slaughtered.

Dirty cattle cost money - whether through rejected animals or slower line speeds at slaughter; and damaged hides due to dung or careless clipping.

Pre-slaughter diet needs consideration - attention to feed prior to slaughter can firm up or reduce the animals' faeces, helping to reduce the presence of faecal contamination of the hide.

Providing adequate bedding improves cattle cleanliness – checking that bedding is adequate on farm, during transport and in lairage at abattoir helps keep cattle clean.

Clipping can remove visible dirt - but it is the last resort as clipping can be stressful for the animal and may damage hide and cause injury to operator.

Wet cattle are a significant hazard - they get dirty more easily and wet coats mean more mobile bacteria.

Transport factors can affect cattle cleanliness - Journey time, lorry design and number of animals transported, all impact on the cleanliness of cattle being delivered to slaughter.

Mixing unfamiliar animals increases the risk of dirty animals arriving to the slaughterhouse and thus cross-contamination can occur during dressing - unlike familiar animals, unfamiliar cattle will frequently rub against each other, spreading faecal contamination between animals.

Bacteria survive well in livestock environments - the farm, the transport, the market and the holding areas should be kept as clean as possible.

Important

References to EU legislation in FSA guidance

Directly applicable EU legislation no longer applies in GB. EU legislation retained when the UK exited the EU became assimilated law on 1 January 2024, published on legislation.gov.uk. References to any legislation in FSA guidance with 'EU' or 'EC' in the title (e.g. Regulation (EC) 178/2002) should now be regarded as assimilated law where applicable to GB. References to 'Retained EU Law' or 'REUL' should now be regarded as references to assimilated law.

For businesses moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, information on [the Windsor Framework](#) is available on GOV.UK.

The Windsor Framework was adopted by the UK and EU on 24 March 2023. The Framework provides a unique set of arrangements to support the flow of agrifood retail products from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI), allowing GB standards for public health in relation to food, marketing and organics to apply for pre-packed retail goods moved via the NI Retail Movement Scheme (NIRMS).

Clean cattle guidance

We have guidance on [how to produce clean cattle for slaughter](#).

Clean sheep guidance

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

[View Provide advice on how to produce clean sheep for slaughter. as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (1.09 MB)