

Cow Hide, Proper Handling For Tanning With Hair On

The first thing you need to do is make sure your butcher knows that you plan to keep the skin for tanning with the hair on, not leather. Cow hides shed hair very easily so it is important to make sure that proper procedure is followed for the best results.

Bacteria is what causes hair loss with any skin. Heat and moisture are the fuel for this, so getting the skin cooled as rapidly as possible is a top priority. Cow hides are heavy and will be wet when skinned, they retain body heat because of this. Reducing the body heat in the skin is important, so *DO NOT* drop a fresh skin in a barrel, tub, box etc. The body heat will be trapped in the center folds of the skin, and when you add in the moisture common during the butchering process, it creates the perfect environment for bacteria. The result will be loose hair in the matter of hours.

The best method of handling a fresh skin is to fold it down the spine, skin to skin, then fold the shoulders over onto the hips. Place the skin on a pallet, or some other type of rack that allows air flow to all sides of the skin, this will allow the body heat to dissipate from the skin quicker and more evenly. It will also allow some of the moisture to dry a little, both of these actions are important in reducing the action of the bacteria.

Ideally you want to get the skin to us the same day if possible so we can get it fleshed and under salt. If scheduling or drive time won't allow this, make sure you can get the skin in a cooler (walk in) or freezer to chill it, after the body heat has dissipated. The skin can be folded again to put in the freezer or cooler, but only after it has cooled and is no longer retaining natural body heat. If you have made arrangements with us for next day delivery, do not let the skin freeze solid. Once it is getting stiff, probably that evening, take it back out of the freezer, keep it iced in a cooler if possible. If you have it in a cooler (walk in, not an Igloo type) just leave it in until you are ready to bring it to us.

If you can not bring the skin to us right away, let it finish freezing after following the above steps. We use a choker chain to cinch on the skin and raise it on a hoist to thaw. The weight of the skin will cause it to unfold as it thaws so the time before fleshing and salting will be a minimum. Try to leave us something to cinch onto, such as a leg or tail exposed. If you want the tail left on the skin, we don't want to use it for hanging, so give us a leg or other piece to cinch.

If you plan to flesh and salt dry the skin, it is still important that you follow all of the instructions above. Now, keep in mind that a raw cow hide will be 100+ pounds. To properly flesh a skin, you will need a fleshing beam and a good fleshing knife, a draw knife will work. All of the red meat and fat needs to be removed from the skin, and preferably also all of the membrane. The cleaner the skin, the better and faster the salt will penetrate the skin. The salt removes the moisture from the skin which stops bacteria action. Use a fine salt, stock salt for feed mixing works fine, do not use the brown mineral salt. Iodized or non-iodized does not matter, either does salt with or without yellow prussiate of soda, they all work, but fine grade instead of coarse (rock salt) is important. The fine grade soaks up moisture much quicker than coarse salt, this is what we want to happen. Do not try to be stingy on the salt, just use 100 pounds on the average size cow hide.

After you have the skin properly fleshed, lay it out flat with the hair down. Spread the salt evenly over the whole skin, paying attention to the edges to make sure you don't have folds that don't get salted. Leave the skin under salt for a minimum of 48 to 72 hours. After salting for this time period, you will need to pick the skin up, shaking off the wet salt, and hang it up to start drying. Drape the skin over a board or plastic pipe that will support the weight, do not hang the skin on any type of metal, wood or plastic (PVC) only. Basically folded in half, shoulders on one side and hips on the other works well.

As the skin is drying the remaining salt will dry up and can be knocked off the skin, a fan blowing on the skin will help speed up the process. The skin will start turning white and begin to stiffen up, it will also begin to be much lighter weight as the moisture content is being reduced because of the drying. As the skin is drying and is starting to feel stiff, fold it one more time so you now have the skin folded into a quarter size. If you plan to bring the skin to us, this is a small enough package to handle easily for storage and eventually soaking to begin the process. If you are going to ship the skin, keep an eye on it and when it is almost too stiff to fold, then you are ready to finish folding and box for shipment.

This whole process reduces the weight of the skin, resulting in much easier handling and cheaper shipping.