

Protecting Cattle Welfare During Transport

Industry segments weigh in on how to safeguard animal welfare in transit.

by **TROY SMITH**, *field editor*

Many hands handle calves as they travel the industry before reaching their final destination. During the Cattle Transportation Symposium hosted by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association May 14-15 in Fort Collins, Colo., representatives of various industry sectors weighed in on what needs to be done to safeguard cattle welfare during that process.

Feedyard perspective: Handle with care

"We have an animal-handling issue in our feedyards," stated Dan Frese, providing the feedyard perspective on cattle welfare and transportation. The Miller, Neb., veterinarian and cattle feeder cited research suggesting overly aggressive handling is a major contributor to so-called fatigued cattle syndrome.

While pursuing an additional doctorate at Kansas State University (K-State), Frese was involved in research seeking to understand the cause of the syndrome or causes of lameness, lethargy and muscle tremors observed in finished cattle arriving at packing plants. A tremor rippled through the cattle-feeding industry in 2013 when a beta-agonist growth-promoting product was named as the suspected cause.

According to Frese, however, the symptoms have also been observed in finished cattle that did not receive a beta-agonist. He called fatigued cattle syndrome a multi-factorial problem of cattle that typically are heavily muscled and have achieved rapid gains and heavy finish weights. Contributing stressors include environmental factors such as heat and humidity, less-than-optimum facility design, transportation and aggressive cattle handling.

Speaking about cattle handling specifically, Frese said research has shown that finished cattle, when handled aggressively on shipping day, have exhibited increased heart rate and body temperature along with detrimental changes in blood chemistry. Huge increases in plasma lactate has occurred, along with associated acute metabolic acidosis. Additionally, blood pH drops significantly, and serum cortisol levels increase.

"Animals show stiffness, shortness of stride and reluctance to move, just from pushing them too hard," said Frese. "The symptoms of fatigued cattle syndrome can be replicated when no beta-agonist has been used, and physical exertion seems to be a significant trigger."

Frese explained how, in some really big feedyards, fat cattle might have to travel a distance of a mile or more as they are moved from their feeding pen to a load-out area. He suggested feedyard operators consider having "staging pens" located near a load-out area. Cattle could be moved to those pens during the latter part of the feeding period — perhaps for the final 30 days or so — thus reducing the opportunity for cattle to receive excessive physical stress prior to transport.

Frese noted that bruised carcasses continue to be a beef quality problem. He cited data indicating 61% of bruises occurred along the dorsal midline, with a third of bruises located in the loin area — a source of high-value beef cuts.

According to Frese, evidence suggests that bruising may be attributed to cattle hitting or scraping their backs on the upper deck as the animals enter or exit the belly compartment of transport trailers. If so, adaptation of trailer decks and ramps is warranted.

Auction-market perspective: Inherited problems

Larry Schnell knows that many people think auction-market personnel have little regard for animal welfare. The owner/manager of Stockmen's Livestock Exchange, Dickinson, N.D., thinks that judgment is unfair. He admits that some welfare problems do surface at auction markets.

"In most cases, though, it is a reflection of the cattle industry," said Schnell, who presented the auction-market owner's perspective on animal welfare and transportation.

"Auction markets inherit the problems of their consignors," Schnell added. "We don't own the cattle. They are brought to us. The first time we see them is after they are unloaded at our facilities, and some animals come with baggage."

Schnell ran down a list of ways cattle

may be mismanaged by their owners or people responsible for transporting animals to market. He

noted how some consignors try to counter transportation shrink by getting up extra early to feed cattle before hauling them to market. Attempting to "fill" cattle sometimes causes digestive disturbances during transportation, resulting in some cattle becoming sick by arrival, he cautioned.

According to Schnell, cattle arriving in overloaded trailers is a problem. If an animal slips, falls down and is unable to stand again, it may be injured beneath the feet of other animals.

Too few drivers of cattle transportation vehicles really know how to drive when hauling livestock, Schnell said. They don't understand how motion affects the balance of the animals. Thus cattle are jostled around and there is increased potential for falls and injuries.

Schnell said livestock-handling problems and safety issues also arise when cattle are loaded or unloaded by truckers who lack cattle-handling skills. Problems are compounded when the cattle are excitable and unaccustomed to handling of any kind.

In Schnell's opinion, too many compromised animals are delivered to auction markets — animals that are very old, very weak or are otherwise unfit for transport. Still, he said he is astounded by how much a blemished old cow will bring at auction — often up to \$1,000.

"We receive too many animals that never should have been brought to market," Schnell stated, "but as long as there is someone willing to buy

compromised animals, they will keep coming."

Schnell acknowledged that auction markets do have a responsibility to provide safe, well-maintained facilities and capable personnel. He noted Stockmen's Livestock Exchange's attention to training its employees in low-stress cattle-handling techniques. The firm also

has adopted load-out facilities incorporating the Bud-Box design developed by the late stockmanship advisor Bud Williams.

Some animal welfare advocates want

auction markets to do more by requiring consignors and buyers to use only certified truckers.

"Placing that on an auction market's shoulders is unfair and unreasonable," said Schnell. "We can't police the cattle industry. We don't have the leverage, the manpower or the time. Consigned cattle are on our premises for only six to 48 hours. More of

the problems related to animal welfare need to be addressed before they come to us — on the ranch and in the feedlot."

A trucker's perspective: Trained to haul

According to Jeff Johnson, Out West Livestock started as a private enterprise — a way of transporting his Idaho-based family's own feeder calves and finished cattle. Since becoming a commercial business, the firm has grown to include 20 trailers and eight tractors, utilizing both company-employed drivers and owner

Family-owned trucking company prioritizes trucker education and preplanning.

Research indicates aggressive handling, increased exertion contribute to fatigued cattle syndrome in the feedyard.

Auction-market owner encourages greater attention to animal welfare before animals arrive at market.



operators. Out West truckers make plenty of long hauls — 250-300 miles one way — from Idaho feedyards to packing plants in Utah and Washington. There are frequent 8- to 12-hour trips to fetch California feeder cattle.

Hauling cattle in five western states, frequently through the mountains, Out West Livestock wants its drivers to be prepared for the inevitable challenges. During the Cattle Transportation Symposium, Johnson explained how the company prepares drivers to manage the welfare of animals in their charge.

“All of our drivers participate in BQA (Beef Quality Assurance) cattle-handling and transportation seminars,” said Johnson, noting how new drivers also gain short-haul experience before making longer trips. “We have established separate standard operating procedures for winter and summer.”

Johnson emphasized that the procedures focus on safety, sanitation and minimization of cattle stress. In the winter, for example, hauls are scheduled to depart by mid-day in order to avoid traveling mountain passes at night. Drivers are trained in chain-up procedures and are paid for the time required to mount tire chains. The company also maintains communication with destination packing plants and drivers, transmitting information regarding weather events and potential travel delays.

Out West Livestock also makes arrangements at strategic locations along truck routes, at stockyards or auction markets, so drivers can get off the road and even unload cattle if necessary. Johnson said trucks are always bedded, in winter and summer.

Scheduling is different in the summer, when most long hauls of finished cattle occur. At the feedlot, cattle are moved to single-load shipping pens one day prior to departure. The animals remain there, on dirt surfaces, until time to load. Every effort is made to minimize the time cattle spend standing on concrete.

Loading is scheduled for late afternoon to avoid transporting cattle during the

heat of the day. Arrival at packing plants is scheduled so that cattle can go to the kill floor as soon as possible. Johnson said the company’s trailer ventilation design has been adapted to optimize air flow and keep cattle cooler during summer transport.

“We also expect our drivers to inspect cattle prior to loading to make sure all are fit for transport. We want drivers to check

cattle periodically during each trip, at least every two to three hours,” stated Johnson. “Prearranged stop locations can be used if it’s necessary to rearrange a load.”



Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.

Calm handling and proper loading management can safeguard cattle welfare during transport.



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL