

Transporter Certification

Pressured by customers, packers call for certification program for cattle transporters. Canadians may offer model.

Story & photos by
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Distributors and retailers of red meat want to know why U.S. meat packers receive injured or weak and debilitated animals at their processing plants. There is a perception among packers' customers that improper animal handling and transportation conditions are, in many instances, the likely cause. They want something done.

"They expect packers to take corrective action," said Mike Siemens, head of animal welfare and husbandry for Cargill. Both Siemens and Lily Edwards-Callaway, who oversees animal welfare programs for JBS, spoke during the Cattle Transportation Symposium May 14-15 in Fort Collins, Colo. They shared their views regarding the need for a certification program for U.S. cattle transporters.



Customers are pressuring packers to do something about cattle care in transport, shared Mike Siemens, head of animal welfare and husbandry for Cargill.

Edwards-Callaway talked about the government regulations pertaining to animal handling and welfare in packing plants. She noted how regulatory language pertaining to animal welfare can be rather vague. Language calling for animals to be handled "with a minimum of excitement and discomfort" is open to interpretation. How regulatory officials interpret the rules is what matters. Officials are paying more attention to what's happening in packing plants.

"That impacts transporters, too, because once it enters a line-up to unload at a plant, a truck is considered part of the facility, and all of the regulations apply to it as well," said Edwards-Callaway.

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anything perceived to be inhumane treatment, whether it is intended or not. Edwards-Callaway said even one animal falling down — for any reason or for no apparent reason — may be cause for inspectors to issue a "noncompliance record." Inspectors can go so far as to halt plant operations until corrective action is performed. For incidents occurring while cattle are still on trucks or while unloading, "corrective action" may be banning a truck driver from delivering loads to the plant in the future.

Siemens said all of Cargill's swine transporters are trained and certified under the Transport Quality Assurance (TQA) program administered by the National Pork Board. Packers can easily verify a driver's certification status whenever he or she shows up at a plant. Siemens urged the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) to take the lead in developing a similar certification program for cattle transporters.

"The Master Cattle Transporter (MCT) program is a good start, but it needs to be expanded to include certification, like TQA," stated Siemens, adding that some kind of certification is sure to become mandatory for truckers delivering cattle to packing plants.

"If there is not a single, uniform industry-wide program established, each of the large packers may develop its own and each could be different. Or it could be done by people already unfriendly toward the beef industry," said Siemens, "but it is coming."

Canadian model

Canada's multispecies livestock transportation training and

certification program could be the model for a similar program in the United States. Alberta-based livestock-handling specialist Jennifer Woods provided an overview of Canadian Livestock Transport (CLT).

Calling it the product of an industry-led initiative, Woods said CLT began as an Alberta-only program that has spread throughout Canadian provinces. CLT is a standardized, comprehensive training course, offering species-specific training modules for handlers and haulers of cattle, hogs, sheep, poultry and meat horses.

According to Woods, participants learn how stress impacts animal welfare and health, but also meat quality. They learn principles of animal behavior and low-stress handling, with particular attention to loading and unloading. Participants also learn emergency response procedures and are educated regarding Canadian regulations pertaining to livestock transportation.

Woods said an important aspect



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Upon completion of CLT training and payment of a \$375 fee, participants become "certified." Certification must be renewed after a period of three years. CLT Verified is an online tool through which driver certification can be verified.

"CLT is not limited to drivers. It is for anyone involved, from those preparing animals for transport to



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those who act as caregivers after animals are delivered," explained Woods. "We wanted this to be real training, so we use independent instructors — not in-house trainers hired by trucking firms. This is not just window dressing."

Texas A&M University Meat Scientist Dan Hale talked about progress toward developing a program for certifying U.S. livestock transporters. The U.S. beef industry needs to champion the evolution of a program for certification of cattle transporters, he said.

The MCT training program was developed as part of the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) initiative, through funding by the beef checkoff, he noted. MCT offers a printed manual, DVD or online education options for self-training of participants, but MCT is less extensive than the more formal and government-recognized Canadian program.

Hale said movement toward a U.S. program similar to CLT would require establishing an entity to be responsible for organization and administration. A decision would have to be made regarding funding, whether to follow Canada's certification fee-based example or use a different method. Politics, said Hale, makes moving forward complicated. He also warned that livestock transportation is likely to come under increasing regulatory scrutiny.

"We need a certification program. We need to have it rolling to get in front of the regulatory freight train that we can expect to come our way," stated Hale.

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