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Master Cattle Transporter Training

Checkoff-funded collaboration creates program to train livestock transporters.

Story by
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Ken Real is always glad to see a load of incoming feeder cattle arrive in good shape. The Nebraska cattle feeder is relieved to see them unloaded at the feedyard, uninjured and showing minimal stress. It's even more satisfying to see newly arrived cattle make the transition to their new environment with a minimum of sickness.

After all, sorting, loading and hauling cattle present the risk of injury, and transporting them is always stressful. The younger the animals are, the greater their susceptibility. And the greater the stress, the more likely it is that the animals will become sick — usually from the various respiratory infections collectively referred to as “shipping fever.” Aside from treatment costs and potential death loss, animals that get sick usually are less profitable even if they recover and reach suitable market weight.

Like any cattle feeder, Ken Real also knows profits are at risk when market-ready cattle are shipped to the packer. A rough trip can result in carcass defects and associated value discounts, or condemnation if animals are seriously injured. There's always a risk of losing money when cattle are transported. While persons responsible for cattle during transportation — truckers — usually bear that responsibility for a relatively short period of time, what happens during that time can have a huge effect on the health, well-being and value of the cattle.

Real understands the risks and responsibilities of a livestock hauler, too. For some 20 years, his family has operated a trucking business based out of McCool Junction, Neb.

“I don't drive that much myself. Most of our drivers have backed up more miles than I've driven forward. They are professionals,” Real says. “It can be hard to tell a professional driver, with years and many thousands of miles of experience, that some education could help him

do his job better. But sometimes it's true.”

Real says finding a driver with plenty of over-the-road experience is relatively easy compared to finding a driver with cattle savvy. Few drivers come from farm or ranch backgrounds, or have much practical experience working with livestock.

“But think about the responsibility thrown at them,” Real says. “Maybe we send a driver 400 miles to pick up a load of cattle at a sale barn. He (or she) has to locate the cattle and the paperwork that goes with them, sort and load the cattle safely — often after dark or before daylight. The facilities might be poor, and there might not be much help. Then, the cattle are supposed to be delivered to their destination by a certain time. There can be all kinds of scenarios, but a trucker always has a big responsibility.”

Still, Real doubts whether all truckers realize how big a responsibility it is. By his estimate, fewer than 25% of cattle haulers

have actually been inside the packing plants to which they regularly deliver cattle. They don't really understand to what extent carcass value can be affected by a rough ride during transportation. Most drivers haven't worked in a feedyard or witnessed how stress can affect cattle health and performance, Real says. They don't know how much money transportation stress and injury can cost.

“They've never had to treat sick calves and watch some of them die,” Real offers. “And they don't know that a fed-cattle seller might take an \$80 or \$100 hit due to a bruised carcass.”

The National Beef Quality Audit (NBQA) has documented how carcass defects (bruises and blood spotting) attributed to rough handling and jostling while fed cattle are shipped to packing facilities cost the beef industry more than \$114 million. Stress increases the incidence of dark-cutting carcasses, which have lower value due to

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undesirable color, off-flavor and shorter shelf life.

Studies suggest stress from transportation and related handling account for up to a 30% increase in sickness among calves introduced to stocker or feedyard operations. Cattle that become sick and require treatment

often fall short of their genetic potential for average daily gain (ADG), feed efficiency and carcass quality. The Texas A&M University Ranch to Rail program has demonstrated how there can be up to a \$100-per-head difference in the profitability of sick animals vs. healthy contemporaries.

BQA expanded

Real's dual perspective prompted his involvement in the development of a national cattle transportation education program. Many beef-producing states have implemented Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) education initiatives to help beef producers hone husbandry skills that affect beef quality. BQA programs promote best management practices, such as proper

use of animal health products and low-stress cattle handling on the ranch or in the feedlot. However, they have not addressed transportation issues.

"Transportation education is more than just promoting beef quality. It's about driver safety, too," Real adds.

Echoing that is fellow Nebraskan Anne Burkholder, whose family feeds cattle near Cozad. Burkholder heads the Animal Health and Nutrition Committee for the Nebraska Cattlemen, which oversees the state's BQA program. She says the fledgling transportation education effort is a companion program aimed at the producer hauling cattle short distances by gooseneck trailer as well as professional long-distance haulers.

"We're not trying to be critical of truckers. Many producers could also benefit from training that emphasizes best management practices for handling, loading and hauling cattle. We want a collaborative effort to establish a nationally based educational program," Burkholder says.

With support from the national dollar-a-head beef checkoff, beef producers, trucking industry representatives and land-grant university personnel have collaborated in the creation of the Master Cattle Transporter Training program. Burkholder credits Dan Hale, Texas A&M University

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PHOTO BY GARRETT WILKERSON

Extension meat specialist, for his work in developing the program's primary training tool — an instructional video addressing topics that include principles of cattle behavior, low-stress handling tips, and techniques for safe loading and unloading. Also included is information about proper weight distribution and driving safely with a "live" load.

The 45-minute DVD features film footage illustrating the recommended techniques. Commentary is provided by experienced truckers and animal behavior and welfare specialists, including Colorado State University's Temple Grandin, Kansas State University's Janice Swanson and independent cattle consultant Tim O'Byrne. Noted veterinarians and Extension educators also address biosecurity issues and procedures for cleaning and sanitizing trucks and trailers. Accompanying the DVD is a manual or reference guide that drivers can carry in their glove boxes.

Truckers don't make money unless they are on the road, so they may not be able to attend meetings. Hale says the DVD or online computer sessions probably fit them better than the classroom-style meetings typically used for BQA training. The goal is to enable drivers to view the educational materials and complete a short written test to become certified as a "Master Cattle Transporter."

"This project has been a long time in coming together. I've been involved for two and a half years. Dan Hale has been working on it longer than that," Burkholder explains. "But we're now ready to launch it."

The next step

During the 2006 Cattle Industry Annual Convention in Denver, Colo., Burkholder and Hale introduced the program and offered a preview of the DVD to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's (NCBA) Producer Education Committee. Then, in early June it advanced for a review by the national BQA Advisory Board. With a minimum of additional honing and polishing, the project has been given the green light.

According to Burkholder, mass production of DVDs and manuals was to begin this summer. NCBA staffer Ryan Rupert is organizing meetings with packers to rally their support. Dan Hale is preparing trainer materials for distribution this fall and winter. Like state BQA programs, the Master Cattle Transporter program will utilize authorized trainers to certify drivers. The list of trainers is likely to include university Extension personnel, trucking company dispatchers and insurance company field representatives.

"We hope to be certifying drivers by next spring," Burkholder states.

Will drivers respond positively? Ken Real thinks most trucking companies will, as well as many independent drivers. There are incentives to encourage them to seek certification.

"We brought insurance company representatives on board as the program

developed. Some are already promising to offer substantial discounts on liability and workers compensation insurance. That will encourage drivers to become certified," Real says. "Eventually, the big truck lines may require it. I expect feedyards and packers will apply pressure, wanting drivers to be certified."

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trucking company office and request a specific driver, praising that individual's clean rig and ability to handle and load cattle quietly and efficiently.

"I think this program can help all of us experience more of those calls," he adds.

Master Cattle Transporter Training promoters say this proactive program also weakens animal rights activists' claims that production agriculture and its allied

industries don't have a caring attitude toward the animals in their charge.

In addition to enhancing safety, profitability and product quality, transporter training should enhance the image of the trucking industry and that of beef producers. As Ken Real says, "It lends another facet of professionalism."

