



Planning for a

Wreck

No one wants a livestock trucking accident to occur, but if the worst should happen, Jennifer Woods is training individuals how to calmly handle the scene.

Story by
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There's an adage that suggests, "Prepare for the worst and hope for the best." While that may seem a little pessimistic, it's good advice to follow in the case of livestock accidents involving motor vehicles, says Jennifer Woods, a livestock-handling consultant based in Blackie, Alta., Can.

"The most important step is to be prepared ahead of time," Woods says of dealing with a livestock emergency. For the past decade, she has traveled extensively, training emergency responders such as firefighters and police, as well as truck drivers, veterinarians and livestock producers how to humanely and safely deal with livestock at the scene of a trucking accident.

A graduate of Colorado State University in animal science, Woods has worked closely with animal behavior specialist Temple Grandin, who was one of her former professors. Today, Woods continues to collaborate with Grandin on livestock handling, facility design and welfare auditing. She also works as an independent consultant to the livestock industry and governments across North America and Europe. She has extensive experience with cattle, horses, sheep, swine, elk and bison. Her clients have included Cargill, the National Cattleman's Beef Association (NCBA), the National Pork Board, Alberta Farm Animal Care and Smithfield Foods.

Why this is important

Woods began focusing on training others how to respond to livestock trucking accidents about

10 years ago when she realized there was a void among most emergency response teams in understanding how to handle livestock at the scene of an accident.

At that time, she was asked to give a training program to firefighters in her local Alberta community on handling horses involved in motor vehicle accidents. Because Cargill operates a beef plant nearby — processing 4,500 head per day and handling about 100 semi-trailers per day — Woods felt it was important to discuss cattle accidents in her presentation as well.

But, as she collected research for her presentation, Woods realized that — despite the fact that motor vehicle accidents involving commercially transported livestock are a common occurrence — there was not a lot of information available, much less standard policies

and procedures for dealing with such accidents.

"Most emergency responders aren't familiar with livestock or semi-trailers, so they don't know what to do when they are called to an accident," Woods says.

Thus, Woods took the initiative to team up with Alberta Farm Animal Care and develop Canada's first training program to assist first responders and livestock haulers with livestock emergency response.

Woods has since taken her livestock emergency response training to more than 3,000 individuals in North America and Europe. And she underscores how important it is to continue training the industry and emergency responders.

Woods points out that livestock-related accidents have a huge economic cost, but perhaps even

more importantly, because livestock trailers carry live animals, these incidents also have a public concern and must be handled safely and humanely.

“The livestock industry needs to be prepared to handle these accidents when they happen,” Woods says. She emphasizes that doing a good job handling livestock-related accidents is becoming increasingly important since The Humane Society and animal rights groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are getting involved in this issue.

“Animal rights groups are going after transportation,” Woods says. As an example, she says in the pork industry she knows of two cases where PETA has filed legal actions for cruelty to animals for not euthanizing animals at an accident quickly enough. She also cites instances where The Humane Society is working with animal rescue teams, and PETA has an accident response team working with law enforcement.

“That should not be happening. Instead, the livestock industry needs to be stepping up to the plate and working with emergency responders in handling our own wrecks,” Woods says.

Woods notes that she sees some commercial companies being progressive about this issue. She reports that within the swine industry Cargill and Smithfield Foods have made a commitment to training drivers and emergency response teams.

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“They each have four rescue trailers around the country that are ready to respond to a livestock accident when needed. The team that goes with the trailers is trained in livestock emergency response, extrication and euthanasia,”

Woods says. She hopes more livestock companies and industry organizations will follow this lead in being prepared.

How to prepare

Woods says the secret to successfully

handling a motor vehicle accident involving livestock boils down to training and teamwork.

First and foremost, the first responders should be trained specifically to deal with livestock accidents. Just like hazardous

material loads, these incidents have to be handled with extra care and caution, Woods says. Ideally, she recommends that all agencies that would be responding to the accident scene should be trained together so everyone is on the same page.

In her training sessions, Woods covers animal behavior because she says, “An animal rolled over in a trailer is completely different to handle than an animal in a pasture.” And, without knowing how to handle that animal, more injuries could occur to people at the scene as they are trying to help with the rescue.

Likewise, Woods has a semi-trailer at all of her trainings so that emergency responders can become familiar with the compartments of the trailer and how to cut the trailer apart in order to extricate animals.

Secondly, teamwork at the accident scene becomes critically important. Woods says a common challenge at a livestock accident is lack of communication among the emergency responders from different agencies and sometimes even power struggles for control of the scene. Instead, she says that by training ahead of time and having a policy and procedure format in place, each player should know their role at the scene — such as the fire department for extrication, the brand inspector for handling, etc.

As part of the preparation process, Woods also advocates that rescue teams

How often do livestock accidents happen?

Livestock-handling specialist Jennifer Woods recently completed an analysis of the frequency of commercial livestock truck accidents, which types of animals are most often involved and what appeared to cause the accident. Here is a brief summary of her findings:

- Four hundred fifteen motor vehicle accidents involving commercial livestock trailers in Canada and the United States were collected through Google alerts and incident reports. The accidents occurred between 1994 and June 2007.
- The information gathered from these sources showed that the majority of these accidents (56%) involved cattle, followed by pigs at 27% and poultry at 11%. Feeder calves were involved in most of the cattle accidents.
- In the documented accidents, 82% of the trailers rolled over on their side and of these, 84% rolled to the right.
- The livestock transport vehicle was the only vehicle involved in 80% of the accidents, and, in 85% of the accidents overall, driver error was cited as the cause.
- Of the reports that documented time of day, 59% of them occurred between midnight and 9 a.m. The assumption by many has been that weather would be a leading cause of accidents, but the statistics gathered for this analysis do not support that assumption. Only 1% of the reports identified weather conditions as the cause of the accident, and the winter months did not record the highest number of accidents. The month of October led with 40 accidents, followed by November, August, April and May.

Woods concluded that “The fact that the majority of accidents occurred between midnight and 9 a.m., that the majority of the accidents were single vehicle accidents where the truck rolled on the right-hand side, and that driver error was found to be the most common cause of the accidents leads to the conclusion that driver fatigue is the leading cause of these accidents.”

Tips when on the scene of a livestock accident

Livestock-handling specialist Jennifer Woods shares these basic tips if you are at the scene of a livestock accident:

- If the accident occurs on a county road or state highway, by law you are required to call 911. If the accident occurs on private property, you are not required to notify officials, but Woods highly recommends getting help

through the fire department or someone trained in livestock rescue.

- For safety, limit the number of people at the accident scene.
- Set up containment for any live animals. “Don’t open the door to the trailer until you know where you’ll go with those animals. Loose livestock can cause other accidents,” Woods says.
- If you must extricate the animals by cutting the trailer apart, use a saw and start with the roof, but only cut an opening to allow one animal out at a time, Woods says.

have a contact sheet of who to call for panels and stock trailers to contain live animals at the scene or veterinarians who may need to be called in.

“At a livestock accident, I often see that no one knows who to call or what they need or where to get it. A contact sheet developed ahead of time can help,” Woods says.

Woods emphasizes that rescue teams should be trained in euthanasia as well. “Livestock accident responders need to know how it is done and who to euthanize,” Woods says. In her trainings, she also assures rescue teams that euthanasia is the humane treatment option for a severely injured animal.

Accident prevention

In addition to her on-scene trainings and preparation, Woods says another important focus among the livestock industry needs to be accident prevention. Specifically, Woods says research is showing that fatigue management among drivers is a key to accident reduction among livestock haulers.

She advocates working with drivers on how to responsibly manage their sleep patterns, how to recognize fatigue and establishing a company policy on how to deal with fatigue while driving.

“The key is not to roll the truck. Drivers can’t get near the shoulder of the highway. One study showed that a loaded livestock semi-trailer ‘rarely exceeds 5 degrees before reaching the point of imminent rollover,’” Woods says.

Woods reports that training programs for livestock haulers, such as the pork industry’s Trucker Quality Assurance program and the Master Cattle Transporter program being initiated by NCBA, are helping create more awareness for accident prevention training.

“We will never completely eliminate livestock accidents, but we can help minimize them and be prepared to handle them safely when they do occur,” Woods concludes.



Author’s Note: Jennifer Woods offers training courses on topics including Livestock Emergency Response, Livestock Behavior and Handling and Livestock Handling for Youth. For more information visit her web site at www.livestockhandling.net.