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Marketing cull cows

There are several factors to consider when deciding whether or not to ship cull cows to market or slaughter, regardless of when they are culled.

What can it cost you? Although D1/D2 cows were selling for \$0.45/lb in Alberta (when this was written), thin, weak, lame or sick cows were selling for \$0.03 to \$0.09/lb. This equates to \$36 to \$108 for a 1200lb animal. Deductions exceeding \$30 do not leave much to cover transport costs. Auction marts may refuse to accept cows that buyers are not interested in, leaving you with no revenue, and twice the transport costs. Some sales yards and packing plants will bill producers who deliver cattle that do not sell or are condemned.

Producers, shippers, transporters and/or transport companies who contravene provincial or federal animal welfare legislation may face fines up to \$20,000 and be prohibited from owning animals.

Changes to the Canada-Alberta BSE Surveillance Program: Until this month, many cows that were not fit for transport may have been eligible for the Canada-Alberta BSE Surveillance Program. However, eligibility requirements for the BSE Surveillance Program have been tightened considerably. Animals that are over nine years of age, don't have birth records, don't have a clinical history, don't fit into an appropriate target animal category, or have not been owned by the same person for at least 30 days *are no longer eligible for the BSE surveillance program*. Some cows that would have been eligible for the program last year will not qualify anymore.

This may increase the temptation to market these cows in order to extract some revenue, but do not transport animals that are unfit for transport. Some cows should not be shipped to auction marts under any circumstances. Do not load or transport:

Lame, downers, broken legs, or those that cannot rise, stand and walk under their own power.

Excessively thin cows (body condition score of 1) due to hardware disease, lumpjaw, malnutrition, old age, disease or any other cause should not be transported. Cows with a body condition score of 2/5 can be transported short distances if they are segregated.

Cancer eye: Do not transport animals with an obvious growth on the eyeball or eyelid. Advanced cases of cancer eye (i.e. the animal is blind or the eye has been obscured) are not fit for human consumption and will be condemned at the packing plant.

Prolapse: do not ship animals with an obviously displaced vagina or rectum.

Lactating cows: cows that have not been dried off should not be hauled, except for short distances, direct to slaughter.

Pregnant: Do not transport cows to sale if you know they are heavily pregnant or expect them to calve within a few weeks.

Otherwise sick or injured animals: Except on the advice of a veterinarian, do not transport sick or injured animals until they have been treated and recovered. Old, weak or thin cows will need to be segregated from the rest of the herd while they recover. If the animal is not expected to recover, euthanize it on the farm.

If a reportable disease such as rabies, BSE, tuberculosis, etc. is suspected, it must be reported to the CFIA immediately. These animals must not be transported.

Alternatives: There are three main alternatives. The best option may be to make cow culling decisions while these animals are still fit for transport. Animals that are not fit for transport may be euthanized and disposed of at home instead. If you wish to have the carcass removed, West Coast Reduction charges 6.5/lb (\$78 for a 1200 lb carcass) if deadstock pickup is available in your area. Finally, cows that are free of drug, vaccine and chemical residues, do not have a fever above 39°C (104.5°F), have a body condition score of 2 out of 5 or higher, and are able to walk under their own power may be salvageable through emergency slaughter. Animals that do not meet all of these criteria will be condemned.

Look who's watching: There have been five extremely high profile cases of animal abuse focusing on cull cows in 2008. These involved downer cows that were delivered to auction marts in Maryland, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Texas as well as a packing plant in California. These incidents were videotaped by the Humane Society of the United States and released to the media. These videos are available for the world to see at www.hsus.org.

What does it cost the industry? These abuse cases are rare, and are caused by poor decisions made by very few individuals, but they cost the entire industry. For example, the California packing plant case resulted in a recall of 143 million pounds of beef and a \$67 million bill from the U.S. government. The packing plant closed, around 200 plant staff lost their jobs, several people faced criminal charges, and a major buyer disappeared from the cattle market. Similar incidents have not happened in Canada. This is due to higher producer awareness, communication and education efforts by groups like AFAC (e.g. AFAC's *Standards for the Care of Unfit Animals* booklet) and stricter transportation and slaughter requirements. However, everyone in the industry is responsible to ensure that they don't happen.

These cases may cause consumers to question the integrity of our industry. Throughout the BSE crisis our industry learned how important consumer confidence is. The support of Canadian consumers was reflected in increased beef consumption as well as public backing for industry support programs. As the industry adjusts to new challenges from exchange rates and feed costs, we need to continue to ensure that the public continues to have confidence in how we manage our animals and business.

Don't load an animal if you don't want to see its picture and your name on the national news.

Always act like someone is watching - they might be. For more advice on whether or not an animal is fit to load, consult your veterinarian, auction mart or a reputable trucker.