

Truck West, April 2004

Understanding Animal Behaviour Helps During the Haul

By James Menzies

RED DEER, Alta. - There's a lot more to hauling livestock than driving the truck from Point A to Point B. Livestock haulers are a unique breed that must be equally talented at reading animals and reducing their stress levels, as they are at driving the truck.

Any professional driver can get behind the wheel and drive the truck to its destination, but can they do so while minimizing the stress on the freight - in this case a load of live animals? There are good reasons for familiarizing yourself with the stress points of livestock. The first is safety. Stress out a 1,200-lb. bull and you can find yourself squished like a grape against the inside of a cattleliner if you're not careful. The second is economical. Calm cattle gain weight better. If you earn a reputation for transporting cattle efficiently and effectively while minimizing stress along the way, then your services will be more sought after by producers.

Cattle handling expert Jennifer Woods was at the Alberta Beef Industry Conference in Red Deer recently to address the 12 stress points of livestock - or what she refers to as the Dirty Dozen. Livestock haulers should be constantly aware of these stress points while loading, transporting and unloading livestock.

1. Isolation: Cattle are herd animals and they prefer to be in the company of other cattle. Woods says she has seen a steer that was left alone in a liner go berserk after 20 minutes of isolation. It was a typical steer that had exhibited no signs of aggression prior to its time alone on the trailer. "They're very strong herd animals and they do not like being left alone," she warns.

2. Change/Novelty: An animal's very first trailer ride is a prime example of change/novelty, and not all animals react well to it. "The whole environment is new," says Woods. She suggests allowing livestock to familiarize themselves with the trailer while loading for the first time to reduce their stress levels. She adds that animals that are calm by nature will not react to the novelty as much as animals that are high strung.

3. Processing: Understandably, branding is a stressful experience for livestock, but fortunately the truckers are rarely involved in this process.

4. Transport: Perhaps the most important of the Dirty Dozen for livestock haulers, "Any form of transportation is stressful for the animal," points out Woods. "Especially if you flip over!"

5. Loading/Unloading: Woods says animals are particularly stressed when loading/unloading liners. Cattleliners are not easy to negotiate and cattle are not used to the smell of the trailer or the surface area they are walking on. There are some ways to reduce stress while loading and unloading. "Always make sure the trailer is lined up," advises Woods. She also suggests pre-sorting cattle rather than rushing them on the trailer and organizing them on board.

6. Exhaustion: Pigs are especially susceptible to exhaustion, particularly during hauls of four to five hours (during which they'll usually remain standing).

7. Hunger/Thirst: On long hauls, be sure to provide food and water and ensure the animals are able to enjoy it comfortably.

8. Illness/Treatment: Another stress point that usually isn't the responsibility of the trucker. However, if you do find yourself having to vaccinate an animal, do so in different areas of the body rather than the same place for each injection.

9. Weather: Protect livestock from the elements during transport. Even cattle can be affected by cold weather. Woods points out that thousands of cattle died during the Quebec ice storms.

10. Breeding: Not usually an issue for haulers.

11. Maternal instinct: "Babies change the attitude of everybody," reasons Woods. Be careful when loading or working with cows that have young calves.

12. Predators: Even your pet dog can be considered a predator - keep it away from the trailer while loading. "Unless you have a dog really well-trained, a dog is a predator," Woods says.

There are some typical signs that are exhibited by stressed out livestock. They include: tail swishing and milling about (trying to get to the middle of the herd); vocalizing (cattle normally only vocalize when something is wrong while pigs vocalize for no apparent reason); apprehensive behaviour; heads raised in the air; and increased defecation.

Being cognizant of the stress levels of the animals you're hauling is an important part of the job. It's what separates a professional driver from a professional livestock hauler. n

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