

Transportation Fitness: Focus on Lameness



A Fact Sheet for the Canadian Cattle Industry

The following fact sheet was created using recommendations from the Compromised Cattle Benchmarking Project to highlight conditions of importance that should be brought to the cattle industry's attention when transporting cattle. The goal of AFAC's Compromised Cattle Benchmarking Project was to observe cattle arriving at auction markets and abattoirs throughout Alberta and catalogue the incidence and type of conditions observed upon arrival

Key Points about Transport Decisions:

When deciding if an animal can be transported, it is important to consider how the animal will withstand loading, transit, and unloading.

If an animal is being shipped to an auction market, the animal needs to be fit enough to withstand sale conditions and at least one subsequent trip. This may involve:

- Standing on hard surfaces
- Transport on a liner, involving climbing and descending incline ramps
- Hauls of a long duration
- Mixing animals

These normal parts of transport can be challenging to animals with decreased mobility and can lead to undue suffering during transport depending on the animal's condition. They can also cause lameness to worsen.

During the Compromised Cattle Benchmarking Project, lameness was the most frequently observed condition at Auction Markets, Provincial Abattoirs, and Federal Abattoirs.

When does lameness limit where an animal can be transported?

An animal is considered **compromised** if it has imperfect locomotion such as:

- Minor stiffness/shortness of stride
- A slight limp - the lame leg may not be immediately identifiable
- These animals may still be able to keep up with a group, but are still compromised

During the Compromised Benchmarking Project, the following lameness conditions classified an animal as compromised or unfit.

Compromised:

- Lameness score 3 or 4/5
- signs of abnormal movement (ataxia, non-weight bearing, stiffness, muscle atrophy, missing limb(s) or feet, etc.)

Unfit:

- 4/5 + instability
5/5
- Non-ambulatory cattle
- Split or hobbled cattle

Compromised animals must be transported with special provisions, directly to the nearest suitable place to receive care, treatment, or be humanely slaughtered or euthanized.

THESE ANIMALS SHOULD NOT BE TRANSPORTED TO AN AUCTION OR ASSEMBLY YARD.

For **compromised animals**, transport to the nearest provincial abattoir with appropriate special provisions is acceptable, whereas transport to an auction market is not. Alternatively, the animal could be treated and transported once improved (if applicable), or humanely euthanized on farm.

An animal is considered **unfit** if:

- It cannot rise without assistance
- It cannot remain standing without assistance
- It is reluctant to walk and has halted movement
- It walks with an arched back, head bob, has an obvious limp and uneven weight bearing
- Is not bearing weight on one leg (obvious shortened stride or will not use foot to walk)
- Must be strongly encouraged to move

Unfit animals should not be loaded or transported EXCEPT for veterinary care or diagnosis, on the advice of a veterinarian.

Common lameness types observed during the Compromised Cattle Benchmarking Project still being transported to auction markets were:

- Animals with severely long or twisted claws leading to lameness and indicators of pain
- Mild lameness and/or stiffness
- Moderate to severe lameness with decreased weight bearing
- Moderate to severe lameness with stiffness
- Moderate to severe lameness with swollen joints

Commonly observed lameness types (unfit) still arriving to abattoirs were:

- Animals with swollen joints and decreased weight-bearing on one or more limbs
- Animals which were non-weight bearing on one limb

These observations demonstrate that there is still room for improvement in identifying and appropriately disposing of certain compromised and unfit conditions.

The importance of considering how conditions progress:

During the Cattle Benchmarking Project, instances of mature cattle purchased at auction being transported to another market for resale were observed on a regular basis.

Therefore:

- It is important to consider that animals may not be destined directly for slaughter and may need to withstand multiple loading/unloading, mixing and transport events.
- The increased time before slaughter of cull animals could also allow conditions to worsen over time.

These observations stress the importance of promptly identifying and managing lame animals.

A condition that appears minor before initial transport may be more severe on unloading, or after multiple transport events, time spent standing on hard ground, or delayed time to slaughter.

It is also important to recognize when a condition may progress over time and look much different if time to slaughter is delayed due to resale, or unforeseen events such as weather, plant shutdown, or backlog. It is important to have a good relationship and open communication about transportation fitness with your local abattoir(s), auction market(s), assembly yard(s), and transporter(s).

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