

For immediate release:

Benchmarks set roadmap for livestock care progress

Industry-supported study sheds light on livestock transport in Alberta, setting the stage for further advances in livestock care.

Calgary, AB, Feb. 17, 2009: Pride in a job well done is a collective goal of everyone in the cattle production supply chain. That includes the truckers and others involved in livestock transport in North America, where cattle are hauled an average three to seven times in their lifetime.

So when it comes to taking a closer look at how that job is done, as a basis for doing it better, a brighter spotlight and better understanding are always welcome. That was the attitude clearly shared by the 120 people including transporters, livestock producers, researchers and other industry leaders from across North America who attended the recent Livestock Transport Conference in Calgary, AB.

One of the key examples of how that attitude is driving progress in humane, safe and effective livestock transport, was the unveiling of some preliminary results from an industry-supported transport benchmark study, presented at the conference by Dr. Karen Schwartzkopf-Genswein.

The two-year, Alberta-focused study, set for completion in April 2009, is the first of its kind to document cattle transport practice in Canada. It was requested by industry, through Alberta Beef Producers, and funded by that organization along with the Alberta Livestock Industry Development Fund and Alberta Farm Animal Care.

“There’s great value in knowing what your industry is doing – knowing where you’re doing it well, and where you’re not doing it well,” says Schwartzkopf-Genswein. “That’s what the benchmark study is all about.”

Snapshot of a dynamic industry

The aim of the study was to provide the industry and the general public with a snapshot of current practices, as a foundation for supporting improvements. “The study was a starting point to document the basics, so we have a better understanding of what the norms and extremes are in those transport practices. This will allow us to define and improve those practices, and identify areas where more research is required.”

Industry buy-in and cooperation were essential to the study, says Schwartzkopf-Genswein. The response was very positive on both fronts and that has allowed a strong base of data to be collected.

The data collection process was started in April 2007 and completed in December 2008, with analysis now underway. The data includes information on all transported cattle considered for beef production originating or shipped to Alberta during that period. The study involved the cooperation of 14 transport companies across the province, and collected information related to 5,900 long haul trips as well as numerous short haul trips.

Schwartzkopf-Genswein discussed some preliminary results based on the long haul data. Among the broad level findings, the average number of cattle hauled per truck is 104.3 for calves, 69 for feeders and 42.3 for fat cattle. The average distance traveled is 1106 km, with a minimum of 400 km and maximum of 2,560 km. Fat steers represent 45.5 percent of cattle transported, while fat heifers represent 28.4 percent, followed by feeder steers at 11.2 percent and feeder heifers at 7.9 percent. Calves represent 3.4 percent.

The study has also recorded where the cattle are transported to and from, with by far the greatest volume movement from the feed yard to meat plant.

Also captured was driver information, revealing that while most drivers have more than 10 years experience (33.9 percent), a large number has less than two years experience (31.5 percent).

Delays were another component recorded, with those at the border being the greatest factor. Time on the truck from the end of loading to the start of unloading averaged 16.4 hours. Other factors recorded included animal condition at loading and unloading, temperature, loading density, shrink and other factors.

“When the full data analysis is complete, we will have a very good base of information to work with,” says Schwartzkopf-Genswein.

The role of regulations

While the benchmark study and other industry-driven efforts will continue to support advances in livestock transport, CFIA is also making progress in its effort to update transport regulations.

Dr Martin Appelt, Humane Transport Specialist, CFIA reported on the latest thinking in that process, in the course of a presentation on the key questions related to perceptions, regulations and cost.

As long as the industry and the market that influences it promote and deliver good practices, there is no need for regulations to be heavy handed, says Appelt. But regulations have an important role in making sure acceptable minimum standards are in place as a safeguard.

“Our role is to clearly define for everyone where the line is drawn,” he says.

While some global jurisdictions are pursuing a more invasive regulatory approach, Appelt views the North American approach as ultimately a better model.

“If you look at Australia or the European Union, there is a lot of struggle going on in the regulatory environment to set regulations that define animal welfare in a way meant to bring everybody up to an optimal standard. I believe you can’t do that with regulations.”

The key is to give industry flexibility to do things right in a way that is practical and effective, he says. “At the end of the day, I believe the approach we see in some other parts of the world will fail, because they take away flexibility.”

With industry already taking charge of promoting responsible animal transport, the key concern is that the new regulations support and do not pose any practical challenges to the advances already made. Appelt assured the conference participants that is the case.

Focusing on minimum standards provides a playing field where the players involved know the rules, he explains. Industry can then set its standards according to its own values and marketplace pressures, through means such as codes of practice and industry guidelines.

The Livestock Transport Conference itself and other efforts undertaken by industry to date are proof that this model can result in great progress, he says.

“We know that the vast majority of industry has good standards. It will be up to industry to continue to take responsibility and live up to public expectations. The question is not what is the cost of good animal welfare, but what is the cost of not having good animal welfare – that is the true cost. As long as industry understands that and responds to that, it will be on the right track.”

The Livestock Transport Conference showcased that industry in Alberta and elsewhere has made strong progress in recent years in supporting good practices in many areas of general livestock handling and livestock handling during transport. In Alberta, important examples are industry-developed human handling guideline manuals and the Certified Livestock Transporter (CLT) program – a comprehensive training course and support service for livestock truckers, shippers and receivers. CLT focuses on the humane and safe relocation of livestock and the regulatory requirements for Canada and the US.

-30-

Contact Susan Church at (403) 932-8050, email info@afac.ab.ca or Jackie Wepruk (403) 783-4066, email nfacc@xplornet.com