

For immediate release:

Teamwork drives new progress in livestock transport

Livestock, meat and transport sectors working together across North America for humane, safe and effective livestock transport.

Calgary, AB, Feb. 5, 2009: Livestock producers, transporters and meat processors each deal with different business challenges but all share a critical interest – the welfare of livestock under their care.

This priority and the benefits of working together to address it was a key focus of the recent Livestock Transport Conference in Calgary, AB. Themed “*Are we there yet?*” the conference brought together over 120 people including transporters, livestock producers, researchers and other industry leaders from across North America.

“Livestock care is a growing focus of industry and consumers worldwide, and livestock transport is one of the most critical and visible components,” says Dr. Duane Landals, a veterinarian and a board member of Alberta Farm Animal Care, one of the conference sponsors.

Landals offered opening remarks to a morning session that kicked off with presentations on transporting high risk livestock, managing transport risk at the meat plant and the benefits of transport audits. Each provided a snapshot of the ideas and developments that are shaping a new era of progress in humane, safe and effective livestock transport.

Caring for livestock that need it most

One of the major priorities for progress in livestock transport is to continually improve the care of vulnerable animals, says Dr. Terry Whiting, Manager, Animal Health and Welfare, Manitoba Agriculture and Food, Veterinary Services Branch. Key risk groups include the young, the old, the very thin, the very lame, the very ill and the very compromised.

“All transport is an inconvenience for the animal, but we don’t want to make it a hardship,” says Whiting. “Vulnerable livestock in particular need to be well looked after.”

Addressing the public expectations around this issue requires not only science-based approaches but acknowledgement of the moral and ethical standards upon which society judges the livestock industry. “As an industry, we are often judged but our worst performance. We have to do all we can to meet today’s expectations while still getting our work done efficiently and making it pay.”

Finding the right approaches requires a strong recognition of the practical realities of transporting livestock. “We need to address the challenges with ideas that combine both scientific and practical knowledge. Experience in transporting livestock has at least as much to offer as the science examining livestock transport.”

Much of the focus in improving livestock transport is on decreasing the potential for animal stress. There are two main avenues to accomplishing this, says Whiting. The first is to improve physical components

such as trucks, ramps and facilities. The other is to improve the system of transporting animals. “The efficiency of the system is the one that gets less attention, but I think it is at least as important as the means of transport. It’s harder to measure and harder to regulate, but it’s something that can be addressed by the industry that runs the system.”

Managing transport risk at the meat plant

As a case study of the opportunity for progress at the meat plant level, Bryan Hay of Maple Leaf Foods in Brandon, Man., discussed how Maple Leaf plants conduct regular humane handling plant audits, which include animal unloading.

“Some see an audit as a curse, but we see it as a blessing,” says Hay, Senior Manager, Hog Logistics and Animal Welfare. “It’s not okay now to just say what we do – we have to prove it. Good livestock care leads to good meat quality. That’s what drives everything.”

For the Brandon plant, livestock care was a top priority when the plant increased production to a double shift. As part of the production increase, it expanded its main holding barn to ensure animals received would have adequate rest – at least three hours rest time. The barn and other facility components of the expansion were also designed with more doors and more alleyways, to allow longer unloading times.

“If people aren’t stressed to get the animals off the trucks, you’d be surprised what you can do for animal welfare,” says Hay.

Systems were also incorporated to make sure trucks can begin unloading as soon as they arrive. “One of the biggest things a plant can do to make animal handling bad is to make a driver frustrated. And the biggest way to make a driver frustrated is to make him sit and wait. Our expansion allows as many as six trucks to unload at the same time and we coordinate things so the drivers can get in, get unloaded and get on their way without having to wait around”

Numerous other livestock-friendly considerations were also included to support a positive and relaxed environment for the livestock. Some of these included a herringbone facility designed to support stress-free animal movement, good lighting, pristine environments and removal of distractions in all areas, as well as misting of pens, good air circulation and good feed and water systems. Brandon also has a unique “traffic light” system to monitor noise.

The plant also adopted the use of cameras in unloading areas, to further support proper livestock handling. “When people are being watched they make sure to do things right. It’s also a good way to catch things and look for ways to improve.”

In addition to regular animal handling audits that include animal unloading, Maple Leaf has taken steps to further support livestock care during transport. It requires the drivers it deals with to be certified in livestock transport training programs such as the Certified Livestock Training (CLT) program in Canada and the Transport Quality Assurance (TQA) program in the U.S. It also produces animal handling handbooks and provides them to both drivers and livestock producers.

The company is also working internally and with its industry partners to prepare for the potential for third-party audits that have a transportation component. It welcomes these as part of meeting public expectations. “Good animal welfare is something we strive for all the time. But it’s also strictly good business,” says Hay.

Shift to transportation audits

That attitude is shared by the American Meat Institute (AMI), which recently developed livestock transport audits for unloading at meat plants, reported Dr. Ashley Peterson and Jennifer Woods of AMI's Animal Welfare Committee, Transportation Group.

“Our philosophy is that optimal livestock care is good not only for livestock but for business,” says Peterson, AMI's Director of Legislative Affairs. “It's important that we're following the rules and taking care of the animals to the best of our ability. Audits help us do that. When you have an audit system, you can find those areas within your animal handling system that need to be worked on. You can also build customer confidence.”

Ensuring animal welfare offers distinct benefits for product quality, worker safety and employee morale, she says.

AMI is a national trade association that represents companies that process 95 percent of red meat and 70 percent of turkey in the U.S. and their suppliers throughout North America. AMI introduced animal handling audits several years ago with great results and recently took on the development of livestock transport audits.

So far, it has developed audit systems for swine, beef (including dairy) and sheep, and is starting on one for veal. “All have been designed with the animals in mind,” says Peterson. “There are species specific differences that have to be recognized from audit to audit.”

Developing an audit is extremely challenging, says Woods, who authored the components of AMI's Animal Welfare Audit for Transportation. “The main challenge is you need something that is black and white. You can't have 'grey' questions – you have to be able to answer yes or no. Because you get 10 different auditors in a room with 10 different opinions and you're going to really run into trouble.”

One of the criteria that AMI set up was that the questions had to be basic yes or no and they could not be subjective, says Woods, who has extensive experience working with the livestock industry and government across North America and Europe. The process involved going through volumes of information, included examining guidelines and existing audits from all over the world, and using and refining what would work for specific livestock in the North American context.

The audits are expected to be adopted by AMI members over the next several years and updated regularly based on ongoing feedback and new developments. “This isn't a process with a start and a finish,” says Peterson. “Sustained vigilance is essential. There are always better things we can do and more stringent audits that we can develop.”

The Livestock Care Conference was hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC) and the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC). It was sponsored by National Cattle Feeders' Association, Animal Transportation Association, Alberta Livestock Industry Development Fund and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Program. More information on the conference including additional articles on several of the speaker presentations, is available on the CLT Web site at www.livestocktransport.ca and through the AFAC Web site at www.afac.ab.ca.

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