

Management of Adult Cattle Leaving the Ranch

The recent events at the Hallmark plant in Chino, California have not helped the beef cattle producer. While this debacle involved dairy cattle, the impact has been felt most strongly in the beef cattle sector. It also serves as a reminder that as cow/calf producers we not only raise calves for the fed-cattle market; we also send older cows and bulls to market for beef. I am going to discuss certain aspects of this topic in the column this month.

What was the beef recall at Hallmark all about?

First of all, the initial problem exposed at the Hallmark plant had to do with inhumane treatment of dairy cows prior to slaughter. The video clips taken by an undercover Humane Society member showed cattle being blatantly mistreated by plant employees. There is no excusing this type of behavior and all those involved should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. The type of animal mistreatment displayed in the video clips has no place in animal agriculture. It is against the law, it violates USDA regulations, and it flies in the face of all measures of decency that ranchers and beef producers accept as the norm. There is plenty of potential blame to go around and hopefully the investigations will identify all involved—from any USDA employees responsible for enforcing the regulations to all Hallmark employees involved to any dairy farms of origin that might have mishandled their cattle. All involved need to be identified and held responsible.

Secondly, some non-ambulatory cattle (cattle unable to walk on their own; “downers”) were processed according to the investigations. These types of cattle (non-ambulatory cattle) are not allowed to go to slaughter because they represent a high risk group for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE; mad cow disease). This again, is a USDA regulation and the violation of this part of the regulations is the reason the meat recall was initiated. Is this a major beef safety concern? No, not in my professional opinion; however, this violation of the regulations triggered the recall and that is the way it has to be. Once the line is crossed there has to be some consequences. The problem at Hallmark highlights the need for all of us to “do the right thing” and to make sure other people who handle and transport cattle “do the right thing” also. Self-policing and peer pressure will be more effective than increased regulations. As we can see from the recent Hallmark episode, written regulations don't guarantee success.

What do I need to be aware of in this regard?

While most of the guidelines for handling cattle are common sense, periodic review of best management methods is a good idea. First of all, never transport an animal that cannot stand and walk on their own. Animals unable to stand should not be subject to

further stress or transportation. Allow them treatment and/or time to recover. If that is not possible, arrange to have the animal humanely euthanized. Therefore, animals that cannot stand and walk without assistance fit into this category. Also, cattle that have “split” their hind legs (subsequent to calving or falling on concrete) or those cattle that exhibit pain when walking fit into this category. Cattle that have fractured a limb should not be moved or transported either.

What other types of problems fit into this “do not transport” category?

This is an excellent question and a short list of problems that might fall into this category is below. Whenever there is any question about what type of animals or problems might fall into this category discuss this with your veterinarian.

Thin cattle (low body condition scores) indicative of emaciation and/or weakness.

Dehydrated or exhausted cattle. The transport ***will not*** make them stronger!

Obviously “shocky” cattle or cattle that appear to be dying.

Cattle with suspected or confirmed nervous system disease.

Fever and weakness—cattle with a rectal temperature greater than 103°F.

Uterine prolapse, hernia, or open wounds.

What about cattle not as badly affected?

Some cattle, not in the best of health, can be humanely transported with special treatment or precautions. These provisions include extra bedding, loading in the rear compartment, separation from other animals, penning with familiar animals, and any other procedures that would make transportation less stressful and more comfortable. Some of the conditions that might qualify for this category include the following:

Bloat

Blindness in both eyes

Penis injuries in bulls, water belly in steers

Rectal or vaginal prolapses

Frostbite

Lameness (class 1: cattle visibly lame but able to keep up with the group; class 2: lame cattle unable to keep up with the group) or amputee

Animals that have given birth within the previous 48 hours

Animals still recovering from surgery (dehorning, castration, Caesarian section, etc)

Labored breathing, open wounds, or exposed bones

Any animal that is obviously ill

Cattle with these types of problems should usually only be transported to the nearest available slaughter establishment, or to a veterinary clinic for treatment, or to a veterinary diagnostic laboratory for diagnostic workup.

What about circumstances that don't fit neatly into these categories?

Obviously, some cattle with a fever should go to the veterinarian for diagnosis and cattle or calves that are dehydrated can go for therapy as needed. Your veterinarian can help with protocols for specific conditions that will help ensure the best care for cattle under specific conditions.

Also, the way cattle are routinely handled is very important. Excess use of prods should be discouraged. If handling cattle on your operation is difficult think about potential causes: (1) genetic wildness, (2) facilities that confuse or frighten cattle, (3) excess noise, or (4) corral and squeeze chute design. Work with your livestock advisor, veterinarian, or other expert to "fix" any problems with cattle that are hard to work with or move. We all need to be sure we are handling and transporting our cattle in the most humane and efficient ways possible.

I have been a member of the national Beef Quality Assurance Advisory Board for several years and the BQA program has several sections and educational modules on cattle handling and transportation. There is a new Cattle Transportation and Handling video and a program for Livestock Market employees on cattle handling and transportation is in the final stages of production. These BQA educational programs are available and seminars can be scheduled through the CCA office. The successful marketing of beef depends on the consumer's confidence we all are working hard everyday to treat our cattle in the most humane manner possible.

John Maas, DVM, MS
Diplomate, ACVN & ACVIM
Extension Veterinarian
School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis