

Auction Market Cattle Welfare Initiatives

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There are many changes that have occurred in the Livestock Marketing Industry in recent years. By now we have all seen the television footage aired on the program "Hardcopy" a few years ago. The image portrayed to the general population is not indicative of what we in the Livestock Marketing Industry strive to achieve on a daily basis; however, it is hard to explain those images away when it is clear that those situations occurred and were documented.

One way that these situations have been improved is through employee training. Many sale barns have started, or stepped up, employee education programs. They have used programs from the Livestock Marketing Association, the Livestock Conservation Institute, and the Ontario Farm Animal Council to educate employees on the proper handling of animals. There are videos and published materials available that are very informative and will help educate employees on a variety of topics.

Some markets have started to use sorting poles, sorting flags, and cattle paddles in place of traditional canes and cattle prods as "persuasion devices." Markets that continue the use of canes and prods are monitoring their use. Employees who cannot use these items properly are often given a warning and then replaced if they do not improve their handling practices.

Employees are also being trained to understand cattle movement. The simple principle of working a cow's flight zone is an easy way to move a cow without needing physical contact with the animal. We must keep in mind that some of the help available to us may need to be educated. It is important for the employees to keep in mind that these cattle are in unfamiliar surroundings and are not sure where they are supposed to go.

Over-crowding of cattle and calves in pens is also an area that employees need to be conscious of, especially during hot weather. It is important for employees to recognize the cow that is weak and could get jostled in a pen of large, strong cows. A strong, dominant cow will often single out a weak cow in a pen of strange cattle to exert hostility. Most all livestock markets have a "slow pen" for cattle that are weak, thin, or have other special needs. Employees must spot these cattle and pen them appropriately. Bob calves must also have adequate space in pens as they will often lie down. If pens are over-crowded the calves walking around will often step on the ones that are lying down. Weak calves should be kept separate, or not accepted for sale.

Our sale barns have solved the major problem of non-ambulatory cattle by adopting a very specific policy. It states: "Empire Livestock Markets will refuse to accept, or dock in, any animal that in the management's opinion is sick, weak, or non-ambulatory. This includes animals with conditions that may be found offensive to the general public. Empire Livestock Markets fully support the most humane treatment of animals. We ask that you add your support to this very impor-

tant effort." This policy was well received by our truckers as it took the onus away from them when a producer asked them to transport a non-ambulatory animal to market. Cattle that are in this condition should never be marketed in a sale barn as it is a public facility. They should be transported to a local packing plant or humanely euthanized and rendered.

It is important to note that there are processing plants that are now refusing to accept non-ambulatory cattle, especially those with conditions that are considered to be chronic. This should be a wake up call to producers that some animals need to be culled sooner if there is going to be any salvage value.

Several states have already adopted laws on this issue that make it illegal to sell a non-ambulatory animal through a livestock market. This type of law puts all of the markets on the same level so that a producer cannot be upset that one specific market will not accept a particular animal.

Livestock markets must also have a policy for proper treatment and handling of cattle that become disabled while at the markets. As hard as we try to avoid it, there will be instances where an animal becomes non-ambulatory while in our facilities. There must be training in place on how each facility will handle these animals. Gently rolling an animal on to lengths of conveyor belting in order to drag it is acceptable, but not dragging by a limb. Cattle may also be rolled onto a slide board or mat that has an attached chain to be winched or pulled by a tractor. If a forklift is used there should be a metal platform built to fit over the forks that is angled on one side. Straps attached will prevent the animal from slipping off the platform. If a bucket loader is used, there should be one person to operate the loader and two to roll the cow into the bucket. Never attempt to scoop the animal into the bucket.

Innovative thinking by Equity Cooperative Livestock Sales Association in Baraboo, Wisconsin has led to the development of the "Cow Caddy." This hoist has been designed to fit into small spaces like alleys in sale barns in order to lift, move, and lower non-ambulatory animals. There are belts that can be maneuvered under an animal and large wheels that enable the animal to be moved with the least amount of discomfort.

Sometimes, no matter what is tried, the best decision is to euthanize an animal. Most livestock markets have a plan that includes using a captive bolt stunner or a firearm to euthanize an animal. The person in charge is trained to do this correctly in order to do this quickly and effectively.

Many livestock markets have in recent years invested a great deal of money in facility improvements. These improvements have been done to improve the welfare of the cattle, and other livestock, handled through the sale barns.

Many of the sale barns built years ago are undergoing major renovations. An example of this would be our livestock market in Chatham, New York. When we purchased the facility we took a good look at the design of pens, the flow of cattle, ventilation, and calf facilities. It was decided that to have the

cattle flow through the barn most efficiently and with the least amount of stress that the best decision was to strip the barn and start fresh. Old oak board pens with narrow gates were replaced with steel pipe pens that open from any side, as well as in to each other. Alleys were widened to make it easier for cattle to see where we wanted them to go. A new tagging chute and headlock was installed, which has not only improved how cattle are handled, but has also improved employee safety. Additional fans were installed over pens as well as in the walls for improved air flow. Calf holding pens are located just inside the dock, next to the scales, so that they are not moved a great distance to the sale ring. This is especially important in reducing the stress on calves returned to feed.

Some older barns have done simple projects to improve cattle welfare while in the markets. Things like re-grooving floors, adding ventilation, replacing tagging chutes, replacing old water tubs and hay racks all make cattle more comfortable. Rebuilding old dock ramps makes it easier to load cattle onto trucks.

Companies building new markets are consulting with contractors that are modeling the new facilities to be optimal in cow comfort. Many of these facilities resemble the new dairy barns we see being constructed utilizing ideas like drop curtains, raised eaves and wide open construction. Our newest market in Dryden, near Cornell University, is an example of this type of construction project. This facility was completed in March of 1995.

Providing feed and water to cattle that are held over is also done to keep cattle healthy and comfortable while in livestock markets. Cleaning barns and then spreading grit and sawdust to keep floors from becoming slippery also aids in cow comfort, as well as protecting animals from falling and getting bruised. Disinfecting of facilities after each sale helps stop the spread of certain diseases that can infect cattle. This is especially important to cattle that are in feeder cattle or dairy sales that will be going from the sale barn back to a producers farm.

There are many things that livestock markets can do to improve the welfare of cattle that go through our facilities, but one stands out above many that I have mentioned. That is Producer Education Programs. Quite often livestock markets are presented with cattle that are in a condition that no matter what we do, just having those animals in our facility makes us appear to be treating them inhumanely. The true problem here is back at the producer's farm or ranch. Management decisions are being made at the farm that are not in the best welfare interest of the cattle.

This is an area that livestock markets can become involved in to help their producers. There are many programs out there that could use the help of a local sale barn to help promote an educational meeting. Producers are generally comfortable with the local market operators. They also usually open the envelope that their checks arrive in. Livestock markets generally mail out checks weekly and could easily include fliers about an upcoming program.

These meetings could be put on by a pharmaceutical or feed company, the cattleman's association, the local extension office, the local veterinary practice, Ag-Net group, lending institution, or state and federal veterinarians. There are many

groups with a good message to tell and offering our support is the least we can do.

This past November, Empire Livestock helped to organize the Beef Quality Assurance program here in New York. We teamed with the New York Beef Producers Association, New York Beef Industry Council, New York State Diagnostic Lab at Cornell University, Cornell Cooperative Extension, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. There were nine meetings held in five days that covered the entire state. We had over 500 people attend from every part of agriculture and agribusiness imaginable.

The message in the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program is one that not only addresses beef safety and quality, but also stresses good animal husbandry practices.

Other states are also working with their Livestock Markets to deliver the BQA message. This year Alabama has implemented an aggressive program that has spanned the entire state. From January 21 - March 27, 1997, there were 15 Beef Quality Assurance meetings held at Livestock Markets throughout the state using a one-of-a-kind display. This display was developed specifically to be used in a market setting to give producers a hands-on, life-sized, practical and easy to understand message. There were also two meetings held at Order Buyer facilities that included selected clients. Attendance was approximately 2,600 and evaluations suggested that those attending all learned more about the proper handling and care of cattle. This impressive program was a joint effort involving Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Alabama Cattlemen's Assn., Alabama Livestock Markets Assn., Alabama Veterinary Medical Assn., and the National Cattlemen's Beef Assn.

There is also an effort being made by people involved in Livestock Markets, and associations that represent them, to become involved in national organizations that have committees addressing animal welfare. Mr. Scott Stuart of the National Livestock Producers Assn. in Denver Co. is the Chairman of the Livestock Conservation Institute's Livestock Care Committee. The Livestock Marketing Association, based in Kansas City, Missouri, represents the industry in many organizations including the Animal Industry Foundation, the U.S. Animal Health Association's Animal Welfare Committee, and the Farm Animal Welfare Coalition. Ken Jordan, of LMA's Government and Industry affairs, has testified before Congress regarding Animal Welfare as well as animal care and handling in livestock markets.

It is clear that there is a lot being done in the Livestock Marketing Industry to improve Cattle Welfare while in our facilities. The new focus in recent years of helping outside organizations to educate producers before cattle enter the marketing chain is one of the most effective measures taken to date. This new activity has been noticed by producers - both dairy and beef, regulatory agencies, educators, breed associations, packing plants, agribusiness, as well as veterinarians, and acknowledges the efforts being made to improve the industry as a whole. The continued interaction between all of these groups can help achieve an industry that will thrive, rather than merely survive.