

Cattle Business in Mississippi – January 2008 **“Stocker Cents” article**

Cattle Transportation: Management Follow-through

Justin Rhinehart – Beef Cattle Specialist; Mississippi State University Extension Service

Those who have been involved in baseball, football or softball realize the importance of follow-through. For example, a pitcher throwing a curveball has to start with the correct grip, regulate arm speed and angle, choose the most appropriate point of release, and finish the pitch with a full follow-through. These processes are not unlike managing stocker cattle. To optimize return on investment, stocker operators have to start with the correct cattle and receiving protocol, regulate health and performance, choose the most appropriate time to sell or ship, and finish by making sure the cattle reach their next destination without compromising profit (the follow-through). Most managers who have been operating for several years realize that even transportation from one pasture to another impacts cattle performance. However, one of the most crucial events for stocker cattle is transportation to the next phase of beef production, the feedlot. This transport has more impact on performance because the trip is usually more than 500 miles from locations in the southeast. Furthermore, it includes “middlemen” and a period of time when your cattle are not under your direct management.

The most important concern with any type of livestock transportation is stress applied to the animals. It is well documented that transportation stress leads to decreased immunity and increased disease shedding resulting in an overall negative impact on health and performance. There are essentially three points associated with transportation where stress can be limited: 1) loading, 2) transport and 3) unloading. First, handling immediately prior to and during loading sets the tone for the amount of stress these animals will encounter. Simply stated, handling stress for cattle comes from their fear of humans. To cattle, humans are predators and this initiates their “fight or flight” response. Conceptually, it is easy to reduce handling stress prior to transportation by being calm while sorting and loading, reducing loud noises and yelling, limiting hits with sorting sticks and prods and having solid sides on the load allies and ramps. As easy as it may seem, putting these principles into practice takes patience and planning. Therefore, planning a day to sort and load cattle without other pressing appointments can make it easier to stick to low-stress handling and hauling principles. Make sure that a loading plan has been discussed with the driver. An effective loading plan will consider number and size of the animals to appropriately distribute weight in a manner that does not group large and small cattle together.

The second logical phase that presents an opportunity to limit stress is during the actual transport. One critical component within this phase is selection of a reputable hauler. As with any other management decisions, consult with neighbors and other producers that have used several different haulers and settled with one company or person they are comfortable using. Some of the things to look for while evaluating haulers include cleanliness of equipment, willingness to explain loading procedures, timeliness and

cost. Ask the hauler a few questions such as how and how often they clean their equipment, how long they have been operating, if they have an emergency plan, how they address bio-security and how they plan to load your specific group of cattle. Make sure to ask if the haulers are Master Cattle Transporter certified through the National Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program. If the hauler is certified, they will likely follow guidelines for safe driving that reduces stress. Guidelines such as checking weather and road conditions (for the entire route) prior to departure, making special plans for extreme hot or cold temperature; avoiding excessive starting, stopping and turning; and checking the cattle after the first two hours and every subsequent four hours.

Finally, the third step where stress can be limited is unloading. Cattle should be unloaded within no more than one hour after arrival but sooner in extreme weather conditions. Many of the low-stress handling procedures hold true for both loading and unloading. The trailer should be square with the ramp to prevent jumping or trapping legs and hooves. Again, loud noises, yelling, crowding and excessive striking should be minimized. For many stocker operators and cow – calf producers in the southeast, unloading is less important as transfer of ownership has already taken place. However, the perceived reputation of a producer can be strengthened if the cattle arrive in good shape and require less treatment for poor health due to shipping stress. Furthermore, if ownership of the cattle is to be retained, unloading is equally as important as loading and transport. Even though sellers have less control over transport and unloading, they are essential parts of the follow-through that have a direct and critical impact on the end product and eventual profitability.