

Cattle Business in Mississippi – September 2020

“Stocker Cents” article

What they see matters!

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2020 has brought many changes to the world. No one could have predicted the twists and turns the year has taken (I know I didn't have murder hornets and a land locked hurricane in Iowa on my bingo card). The market disruptions in the spring served to direct the focus of many consumers to ways that they could source their food more locally. This in turn led to the widespread demand we've seen for local beef. In turn, many consumers also took the opportunity to pay closer attention to things like how that beef was being raised.

We exist in a time of smart phones, fast answers, and general information overload. While in some areas it is a good thing that information is always at one's fingertips, this may create problems as images and videos can be quickly misinterpreted and shared. Every person with a smart phone carries around a pocket-sized photo and video camera, with the internet at their fingertips to easily share any image they might find. So, what does this mean for Mississippi beef producers? It means that it is even more important now than ever that producers are mindful about how certain things appear in the public eye.

One area where we may not consider that can cause negative perceptions in Mississippi is traveling down the highway to haul animals to an auction market. I always jokingly say: the answer to how many cattle can fit on the trailer is not “just one more”. Trailer stocking density and handling cattle properly during transportation are important considerations for consumer perceptions. There are economic incentives to properly transporting animals. Simply, cattle that are injured sell for less money. Sort cattle into loading groups based on size, sex, and horn status. Load different groups into separate compartments. Load heavier cattle toward the front of the trailer. Load bulls that have not been housed together before into separate compartments. Separate cattle that are purchased from separate sources or different groups. This keeps them from trying to establish a new social order on the trailer. A table and more information on maximum recommended numbers of polled or dehorned cattle for trailers of different dimensions can be found at extension.msstate.edu/node/8228.

Fewer mature or fat cattle than feeder cattle will fit on a given trailer due to the differences in cattle size and weight. Ensuring that the proper number of animals are loaded onto a trailer can minimize stress, bruising, injury, and possible death losses. The presence of horns on cattle reduces the number of recommended cattle to be loaded together on a trailer. Reduce trailer stocking density by 5 percent for cattle with horns. Also be sure to reduce the number of head loaded during hot conditions. Do not exceed the Gross Vehicle Weight Rating for the truck and trailer. Strictly adhere to safe load levels regarding animal weight and space allocation. Provide adequate space for cattle to stand with little risk of being forced down because of overcrowding. When the vehicle is not full, safely partition cattle into smaller areas to provide stability for the cattle and the vehicle. It is the driver's responsibility to know trailer dimensions, load only the

size of cattle that will safely and humanely fit the trailer and adhere to the maximum legal load limit for the states in which they are operating.

Perceptions are not limited to those that occur while traveling down the highway, it is important to consider practices and how cattle are managed at home as well. Take a step back and consider how some practices and handling may be viewed through the eyes of a person unfamiliar with cattle. We've seen all too well in recent years how one picture or video can have a huge impact on a market causing dramatic drops in prices on even product recalls.

Consider this example: a picture was taken while driving down a 4 lane highway from the rear of a loaded stock trailer, and showing a group of cows tightly packed into the front section of the trailer, with calves literally piled on top of one another in the back compartment of the trailer. These calves were packed so tight into that compartment that they could not stand without being top of one other. What do you think the person in the car following that stock trailer thought about how that producer cared for their animals?

Due to the location of the photo, it was assumed that this trailer was headed to an auction market on sale day which was approximately 20 minutes away from the picture's location. The initial reaction for most who would see this may be to say that this is an isolated incident of a producer who used poor judgment in trying to save an extra trip to the auction market, and this is not how most producers treat their animals. It is important for all to understand that this is not sending the message we want to consumers about how we treat our animals. While it may mean confronting a family member or neighbor that taking an extra trip to the auction market is the better option than packing those extra five calves onto a trailer to save a little time and fuel.

Last fall a campaign was launched to tell the story of animal care to consumers and share the story of Beef Quality Assurance. It was called "Raising the Bar on Raising Cattle", and was very well received across the country. In fact, it featured 2 Mississippi families! Bluff Creek Cattle Company and Brad Jones were featured along with my family and MBK Cattle. You can find more information about that series here:

<https://www.beefitswhatsfordinner.com/raising-beef/beef-quality-assurance>

Cattle producers have every incentive to be certain that cattle are well managed and cared for. Taking the time to evaluate a practice or a situation, in particularly when cattle are transported on public highways, is imperative as an industry we are often faced with groups whose goal is to abolish animal agriculture. Cattlemen are great stewards of both the land and their cattle, and it is vital that our beef consumer understands the care that's put in to and the importance of these animals to us. It is ultimately our responsibility as beef producers to tell our great story!

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit extension.msstate.edu/beef