

Cattle Business in Mississippi – September 2014
“Stocker Cents” article

What do they see? Being mindful of appearances.

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In today's world, 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 now 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 it ever was that producers are mindful about how certain things appear to the general public, the ultimate consumer of our product.

One area where we may not consider the perception of consumers that occurs on a regular basis in Mississippi is traveling down the highway to haul animals to an auction market. However, trailer stocking density and handling cattle properly during transportation are important considerations to consumer perceptions. There are economic incentives to properly transporting animals. Cattle that are injured typically sell for less. Sort cattle into loading groups based on size, sex, and horns. 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 <http://msucares.com/pubs/publications/p2797.pdf>. 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 with regard to 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.

A picture and story were shared earlier this year from a nearby state. The picture was taken while driving down a 4 lane highway from the rear of a loaded stock trailer, and showed a group of cows tightly packed into the front section of the trailer, with calves literally piled on top of one another on 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. 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.

The current market makes cattle a very valuable commodity, and offers even more incentive to producers 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 msucares.com/livestock/beef.