



# Transporting Cattle Internationally



## ***Transporting cattle internationally has many benefits, but producers must be cognizant of the challenges.***

by **Heather Smith Thomas**



Some breeders choose to send cattle to other countries. This takes a bit of planning to make sure the cattle are comfortable and healthy during the trip. Ashley Stokes, assistant dean for admissions and student services, College of Veterinary Medicine at Colorado State University, has led studies that collected data from shipping containers, called cow-tainers, during transport.

Stokes notes international movement is generally by air or ship, unless the cattle are going by truck to Canada or Mexico.

“The number-one thing producers need to be aware of is about 95% of the effort in transportation of animals is in the planning and follow-up processes, and about 5% is the actual transporting,” Stokes says.

She explains, based upon where the cattle are traveling to and from, there may be special requirements such as extra testing. It is important to work with an accredited veterinarian who can help with the process.

Fortunately for producers looking to transport livestock globally, there are many businesses that specialize in the process and can assist with preparing animals for transport and filling out pre-departure paperwork. In fact, Stokes says the Animal Transportation Association offers a website that lists these resources for people who want to ship animals internationally.

“There are professional people who can help facilitate these shipments, to take the pressure off the producer, especially if he or she hasn’t done it before. The professional transporters know the best practices and can be a tremendous help,” she explains.

Stokes stresses the importance of planning ahead to ensure everything is taken care of pre-transport. She notes there are many logistics to consider and attention to those details is what makes the difference for the sender and the

receiver. She says it is also important for the people receiving the animals to ensure their facilities are prepared.

In addition to logistical preparation, Stokes says there is plenty of preparation to do with the cattle, as well. She explains the cattle should be introduced to the feed they’ll be eating on the trip at least 30 days before they are transported. Additionally, they need to be bunk broke and to know exactly where the feed is and how to drink the water.

“Regarding the animals themselves, I am a firm believer in this preconditioning,” she says.

“This may take a couple of months, getting them ready nutritionally and providing proper vaccinations [for peak levels of immunity by the time they travel] and paperwork.”

She compares the idea to humans traveling. She notes humans enjoy a break, and changing airports can allot for that. In contrast, cattle would rather stay in one area for the duration of traveling. The most stressful aspect of transportation is loading and unloading, so people involved in the process try to keep those requirements at a minimum to minimize stress.

Another way to prepare cattle for the trip is to utilize low-stress handling and to get them accustomed to being around people.

“During the transport, people will be checking and feeding them. If there’s a problem, these people need to be able to treat them. So it is important to get the animals used to people, and accustomed to being in their environment,” she says. “If they are not used to that, it is very stressful for them. If we can take time to prep them and get them used to how they are going to be transported, it will minimize problems.”

She explains that the best way to do this would be to put the animals in a box stall and allow them to become accustomed to that type of environment. In

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— **Ashely Stokes**

## Shipping semen and/or embryos

Many breeders send semen or embryos to other countries because shipping them is a little easier than sending live animals. However, there are still some regulations that must be followed, and the semen or embryos need to be kept at the proper temperature.

"Breeders can talk to their state veterinarian, or a federally accredited veterinarian, to become familiar with the requirements for international transport," says Ashley Stokes, assistant dean for admissions and student services at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Colorado State University.

Producers can often ship semen or embryos to countries when importations of live animals are prohibited. There are strict regulations for preparing semen or embryos for export. If breeders wish to export embryos internationally, they need to use Certified Semen Services (CSS) approved semen and to use a company that has an accredited veterinarian in the American Embryo Transfer Association to collect and prepare those embryos for export. **HW**

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addition, she stresses the importance of the animals being healthy and strong before the trip because transporting an animal that is not well is not ideal.

For long-haul transportation, health checks are part of the protocol to make sure the animals are OK and safe to be transported, for their health and well-being and for the benefit of other animals that might be transported with them.

"The preparation is critical for success of that transport," she says.

### Cow-tainers

Animals that travel by air or sea are placed in special containers that are safe for them to be in for the duration of the trip. Modified 747 aircrafts with specialized cargo containers are often used for transporting livestock. In other instances, cattle are sent by ship.

Most of Stokes' work has focused with overseas shipping. She explains some ships are equipped with stock pens, but the most common containers she has worked with are called "cow-tainers."

"These are custom-built, double-level containers that have really good ventilation, non-slip flooring, and feed and water facilities built in so the cattle have access to feed and water throughout the transport. They also have a way for cleaning them out daily," Stokes says.

She further explains the cow-tainer is a 40-foot double-decker container that holds several animals. It can be put onto a truck and then loaded onto a ship.



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“It is best if the cattle are already used to the group they will be with. They have room to stand, lie down, look out the windows, and they do very well in these,” she says.

Stokes explains the cattle are typically grouped with their traveling companions at the ranch ahead of time, so they are well acquainted and compatible. Then they are loaded into the cow-tainers at the home ranch and stay in those during the truck ride to the ship. The containers may rest on the dock for a short time until they are loaded into the ship — onto the lower deck levels where they are kept well away from refrigeration containers that expel exhaust. The cow-tainers are placed in the center of the ship, where the animals will experience the least amount of movement.

Stokes was involved in a study that observed cattle during transport to see how well they were doing — making sure that the process wasn’t too stressful and as good as it could be.

“We always need to evaluate how we are doing things and always look to improve,” she says. “So we checked their temperatures, which can be one indication of stress. As animals move around and become agitated or tense they create a lot of body heat with all that muscle mass. We looked at everything, even collecting white blood cells from blood samples, looking at some of the stress indicators.”

She notes there was little stress when the cattle first got into their containers and individuals conducting the study found the stress level returned to normal quickly. She reported the body temperatures, which they were initially concerned about in the tropical environment, never rose into dangerous ranges during the study. Since the containers have good ventilation with windows, she says she thinks that helped.

Stokes and her team of researchers collected data from shipments of heifers sent from Hawaii to the mainland U.S. to evaluate the health and safety of the cattle in the cow-tainers. To monitor the animals’ temperatures, vaginal sensors were inserted. All of the containers were equipped with cameras and sensors to measure humidity and temperature. The cameras took photos every 10 minutes and gave clues to the animals’ behavior and comfort. In these shipments, the heifers lived in their containers for five days as they crossed the ocean from Hawaii to the port at Seattle, Wash., and were then trucked to Ellensburg, Wash. Winter shipments went to California to avoid rough seas and colder weather.

Stokes explains the camera footage documenting the trip in its entirety showed the cattle to be very comfortable on their voyage. Depending on how far they are going, they will be on the ship for several days, so it was positive to see cattle adjusted to

traveling well. In addition to monitoring the cattle with cameras, individuals involved in the shipping process also hire people to travel with the cattle should there be any trouble.

“We always send stock-tenders with them. We have people who go through training programs and know all the protocols and how to handle cattle and various situations. Those people stay with the cattle all the time, and know who to call if there’s an issue. The ship has satellite phones, so that’s not a problem,” Stokes explains.

The stock-tenders start out with the cattle at the home ranch and travel with them on the ship or plane until they get to the receiving ranch. This arrangement gives the cattle an additional sense of security, if they are familiar with the people who are tending to them.

“It’s been a great process, and cattlemen have been very progressive and forward-thinking in how they do the transportation,” Stokes says. “They put a lot of heart into what they do. We’ve been very happy with this process.” **HW**

## Finding help

For more information on transport and finding professionals to help with a shipment of cattle, check [animaltransportationassociation.org](http://animaltransportationassociation.org), the website for the Animal Transportation Association (ATA). It has a directory where you can select which species you are working with.

Assistant dean for admissions and student services at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Colorado State University Ashley Stokes says the directory indicates there are 64 organizations that handle transport and their information is available on the ATA website.

“There are companies with professional people who do this every day; they can help get cattle producers connected with the right members of this organization. I am a member of this organization, and I’ve worked with and gotten to know a number of people who are international transporters, and they do a great job. They can help producers a lot,” Stokes says. **HW**



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