



Public sale yards must not become a dumping ground for unhealthy livestock writes David Barbour, Animal Welfare Investigator with the Enforcement Group of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF).

Farmers and persons in charge of animals have a legal obligation under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 to ensure only fit and healthy animals are transported from their properties to sale yards, or any where else for that matter.

As the owner or the person in charge of an animal it is an offence to permit that animal without reasonable excuse to be transported in or on a vehicle while the condition or health of that animal is such as to render it unfit to be transported.

Animals must not be processed through sale yards unless they are fit, healthy and robust enough to tolerate the whole process from leaving the farm to arriving at their final destination without experiencing unnecessary pain or distress.

“Unfit” animals are not only those that are weak, emaciated, injured or lame, but also those with abnormalities that affect their well being, such as advanced cancer eye in cattle or bearings in sheep for example. The farmer or the agent may consider the animal robust at loading, but he or she must make allowances for transporting; withholding from feed and water, holding in sale yards and a further journey may weaken an animal in marginal condition to the point where it will suffer.

The responsibility for the welfare of animals going through sale yards is shared. The farmer or person in charge of the animals is responsible for selecting only those animals fit for the intended journey. If a stock agent or buyer is involved, he or she shares responsibility for selection of stock with the farmer. The transport operator is responsible for the welfare of the stock during transit and can and should refuse to carry animals that are not fit. The sale yard operator should accept only fit and healthy animals for sale, and he or she is responsible for their welfare while they are in the sale yards.

It is unacceptable for an agent or a sale yard operator to find an unfit animal in the sale yard and then “toss the animal in” at auction at no cost to the buyer and allow the animal to be transported again, this time away from the sale yards. Prosecutions under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 may result from this behaviour – the unfit animal must be euthanased on the sale yard premises or a veterinary examination sought as to whether it can be transported and or treated.

Emaciated dairy cows and sheep are all too common in New Zealand sale yards. Farmers who have dairy cows that fall below a Body Condition Score of 3 [on a scale of 1 – 10] must take urgent remedial action to improve their condition. Dairy cattle with a body score 2 or lower and sheep, deer, pigs and horses with a Body Condition Score of 1 or lower are likely to be considered unfit for transport.

Where any doubt exists about an animals fitness for transport, whatever their intended destination, owners or persons in charge should consider either not transporting the animal, or seek a veterinary inspection and a Fitness for Transport Declaration Certificate.

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Unfit animals remaining on the farm should be either treated, euthanased humanely or salvaged on farm by MAF approved Pet Food Dealers.

Farmers must take responsibility for resolving this animal welfare issue. If the owner or person in charge of the animal can get the selection of animals right prior to transport then no one else has to deal with the issue further down the line or have their legal obligation compromised.

Sale yards are a window to the public and the world. Apart from the legal aspects involved, unfit or unhealthy animals in sale yards create a bad image of farming in New Zealand. It has real potential to threaten market access.

Animals transported whilst unfit suffer unnecessary pain and distress because of poor practices and inappropriate decision making.

Animal Welfare Investigator Barbour says that over the course of the next four months, in conjunction with industry, the MAF Animal Welfare Investigation Team will be carrying out proactive visits to sale yards to raise awareness and monitor compliance with the Animal Welfare Act and the associated Codes of Welfare.

Copies of the Codes are available on the MAF website at

<http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/regs/animal-welfare/stds/codes>

For further information, including Codes of Welfare, minimum standards and recommended best practice, visit: www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare

Play a part in preventing the unnecessary pain and suffering of animals by reporting animals in distress to MAF on **0800 327 027**