

Spring Livestock Trailering Safety Tips

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Spring is almost here, and with it comes good weather and livestock hauling. Whether a livestock or horse trailer has been in use all winter or in storage, spring is a great time to do an all-over inspection for safety.

“It is always wise to go over your trailer before hitting the roads for the new season,” says Kenda Lubeck, farm safety coordinator with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “The safest way to make sure all problems are fixed and all areas of concern are addressed is to write and use a plan and a check list.”

- **Tires and Wheels** Are tires in good condition? Look for bulges, slices, bare spots, worn tread.
- Rotate the tires (including balancing and properly inflating them.)
- Clean and repack wheel bearings and replace seals.
- Are the wheel lugs tight? Are they all there?

Floor and Body

- Check for floor for soft spots, rotting, splintering and corrosion. This includes the ramp if you have one.
- If you are using mats, do they fit snugly? Are they worn and need replacing?
- Check metal for rust, aluminum for corrosion.
- Check fiberglass for damage.
- Check and oil all hinges, dividers, doors, locks, and windows.
- Check all gaskets and molding to ensure good fit of windows.

Brakes and Hitch

- Clean and oil the jack stand.
- Grease the ball and the coupler.
- Inspect and service the brake drums and wheels.
- Check fluid levels and lines to hydraulic brakes.
- Do a loaded and unloaded drive test to check for even stopping.
- Inspect emergency trailer brake battery.
- Check levelness of hitched trailer.

Wiring and Suspension

- Do all the lights work?
- Is the wiring intact, clean and secured?
- Grease the springs, shackles if appropriate.
- Check shock absorbers and bushings.
- Tighten up the axle bolts.

Safety Equipment

- Is your first aid kit complete?
- Is your truck and trailer safety kit complete?
- Do you have extra halters and lead ropes?

“It’s also imperative to be familiar and confident with all aspects of your truck and trailer,” says Lubeck. “If you are a first time trailer hauler, practice driving the combination before you ever put a horse in it. Backing a trailer can seem intimidating, but it really isn’t too hard if you know the secret: put your hand on the bottom of the steering wheel and turn it in the direction you want the back of the trailer to go. If you want the trailer to move sharply, turn the wheel before you move the vehicle. If you want to turn more gradually, turn the wheel as the vehicle is moving.

“If you are only hauling one horse in a straight-haul horse trailer, put the horse on the driver’s side. If you are hauling more than one horse, put the heavier one on the driver’s side. Roads are usually crowned higher in the middle so putting the heavier load on this side will help balance the trailer.”

Before you leave for each trip, take the time to check over the rig. Remember, it’s much easier to prevent the problem than to fix it – particularly for safety’s sake.

- Check the tow vehicle.
- Check and replenish engine fluid levels and wiper fluid as towing puts extra stress on the radiator, brakes and transmission. Make sure everything is in top working order.
- Make sure the ball on the tow vehicle is the correct size for the trailer.
- Check tire pressure in the tires of the tow vehicle and the trailer. Improper tire pressure is one of the most common reasons for trailer sway.
- Check lug nuts on the wheels. Wheel nuts and bolts should be torqued before first road use on a new trailer and after each wheel removal.
- Check over your hitch, coupler, breakaway brake battery, and safety chains.

Make sure all lights and the brakes are working properly before you load the animals.

- When the animals are loaded make sure all doors are latched properly.
- Drive down the driveway and before you drive onto the road, get out and check your hitch assembly again.

Use a lower gear when traveling up or down steep grades. On long grades, downshift the transmission and slow to 70 km/h or less to reduce the possibility of overheating.

“Always consider the animals in the trailer,” says Lubeck. “Give them time to prepare for stops. Don’t accelerate quickly, and make sure the trailer has cleared the turn, straightened out, and the animals have regained their balance before you return to normal speed. Travel over bumpy roads carefully.”

If you hear or feel anything that isn’t normal, stop and check it out. Be sure to carry an automobile emergency kit with you and a first aid kit and a cell phone.

Remember that if you have an incident and you become incapacitated for one reason or another, the emergency personnel and police will most likely not have a clue how to handle your animals. In a visible place in your tow vehicle and/or trailer, put a list of emergency numbers for them to call - your veterinarian, friends, or family members who would be able to help make decisions about your animals.

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