

OBSERVATION ON DOUBLE DECK TRANSPORT OF HORSES

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Horses are often transported 1000 to 2000 km in Australia for slaughter for human consumption in Europe and Japan. Double deck transport (DDG) reduces substantially freight costs, but is considered inhumane by some people outside the horse meat industry. We observed the DDT of 50 mixed aged horses from Aramac (Qld) to Bourke (NSW), a distance of 1100 km.

The DDT, with sheeted (covered) sides, conformed to the design standards of the Livestock Transporters' Association of Queensland (LTAQ), and was modified to suit horses. Deck clearance was increased from 1 625 to 1 725 mm to allow the horses to stand comfortably in both decks, without rubbing their withers. The internal ramp was lengthened from 3 000 to 3 650 mm to minimise the risk of head injury when horses entered or exited the top deck.

The horses were mustered by midday on 20th April, 1987, crossbranded and offered hay and water until loading at 0750 hours next day. Only five horses had been handled; the others were unbroken. The driver inspected the horses to ensure they were fit and not too tall to travel safely. They were checked regularly during the journey by JWL, with most stoppages of 10 to 40 min and the longest 3 h. The horses arrived at Bourke at 0840 on 22nd April, 1987, giving a total time of 23 h 40 min for the 1100 km. At slaughter, one horse had a slight bruise on the hip. Carcass weights ranged from 263 to 545 kg, with the majority (33) being 323 to 419 kg.

The driver took great care at all times, especially when stopping and starting, to ensure that no horse fell. No horse went down, rubbed its withers, or arrived lame, injured or dead. The horses appeared to be comfortable, although their heads were not above wither height. On the truck, they were most restless during the 3 h State border stop on day 3. Horses on the top deck fought more than those on the bottom. They moved continually in the yards at Aramac and Bourke, with frequent or attempted biting and some kicking.

Our observations agree with L'Anson of the Commonwealth DPI, and horse abattoir managers. L'Anson (pers. comm.) considered that horses arrived generally in a satisfactory condition on both SD and DDT, whether they were feral or domestic, with the animals descending safely from the top deck. L'Anson also found little bruising, reporting a condemnation rate of 0.096% for whole and/or part carcasses. In all studies, horses fought more when their heads were up.

We consider that horses can be carried safely in modified DDT, provided that they are transported with care, have sufficient deck clearance to stand comfortably, and are drafted on wither height before transport. Further investigation will establish the suitability of standard cattle DDT and set minimum deck clearances.

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