

Livestock transport – black and white? Try fifty shades of grey

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Presentation summary

Livestock transport isn't black and white – it's an evolving system with multiple layers, moving parts, and daily grey areas. Should drivers be the final line of defense for animal welfare when they're handed animals selected by others, often under substandard conditions?

This presentation shares the real challenges facing New Zealand's rural drivers – from ambiguous accountability and unrealistic compliance expectations to physical risks, time constraints, and practical limitations. If we want to improve animal welfare, we need to understand the environment drivers are operating in – and start working together to make it safer and fairer for all.

Introduction: it's not that simple

The question of animal welfare during transport is too often viewed through a binary lens – compliant or non-compliant, fit or unfit, welfare achieved or failed. But in the real world, transport doesn't deal in black and white. It deals in grey: fog, rain, ferry delays, stock agents running late, poorly prepared yards, late notification, short delivery windows, lack of effluent facilities, lack of support while loading, and sick lambs at the back of the mob.

To truly improve welfare outcomes, we need to stop pretending that livestock transport operates in a vacuum.

Drivers, transport companies, farmers, processors, agents, regulators – we're all part of the system. And that system is flawed.

Animal welfare during transport is judged when the truck arrives – but the animal's welfare outcome is shaped long before the wheels turn.

Animals may arrive:

- Not stood off feed.
- Lamé or injured.
- Too tall for the deck height.
- Without appropriate veterinary certification.
- Without tags, despite declarations.

Yet the transport operator or driver is often the one who gets penalised – despite having no control over animal selection, yard preparation, or load notification.

This is not about blame – it's about education.

We want our veterinary colleagues to understand the entire supply chain, including how animal condition is influenced at every point before loading.

Our industry doesn't set out to cause harm

Let's say this clearly: our industry does not head to work intending to harm animals.

Transporting livestock is a responsibility we take seriously — and our people work with pride and care.

But when you're operating with:

- Limited visibility and limited support during fast-paced loading.
- High mob numbers (e.g. 600+ lambs).
- Fatigue rules and scheduling pressures.
- Inconsistent loading facilities.
- Crates constrained by bridge height and compliance limits.

Then issues can occur even with the best intent and practice.

Drivers aren't trained or resourced to make clinical assessments, yet they're expected to make split-second welfare decisions in high-pressure, fast-moving environments.

We've had drivers penalised for:

- Missing ear tags.
- Slight lameness that was undetectable during loading.
- Tall animals causing back rub, with no prior height notification from the supplier.

It's an impossible ask and the responsibility is misaligned.

Reality check!

Accountability must be shared across the supply chain. That means training and resourcing farmers better, using technology to flag fitness concerns earlier, and aligning processing systems with transport realities.

Where responsibility sits – and where it often lands

The person presenting the animals (typically the farmer or agent) is required to complete the Animal Status Declaration (ASD) and confirm animals are fit for transport. But if:

- A tag is missing.
- A cow is lame.
- A sheep arrives down.

It is the transport operator or driver who faces fines or reputational damage. The farmer may only receive a warning (if that).

We believe this is an imbalance. Veterinarians should be aware that when investigating welfare cases, the root cause may lie further upstream, and that the consequence is not always falling where the cause began.

This is why a supply chain approach to animal welfare is essential.

The conditions we operate in

Yes, crates have evolved. And yes, our industry continues to invest in safer and better equipment. But there are factors outside our control:

- Crate heights are restricted by bridge clearances and road infrastructure.
- Weight and axle limits restrict what modifications can be made, and how stock can be loaded.
- A brand-new livestock unit costs around \$1 million - in an environment of falling volumes and rising costs.
- Not every animal presented matches the crate setup available.
- Wait times at processors can stretch 2–3 hours, especially in peak season - adding risk of heat stress and fatigue for both stock and staff.

The design isn't perfect. But it's not because transporters don't care – it's because the system itself is constrained by infrastructure, economics, and regulation.

Drivers are expected to do their best with the tools they have but those tools are shaped by many factors outside their control.

Our industry doesn't operate in a perfect world. It operates on practical judgment, experience, and an understanding of where trade-offs must be made.

What drivers are actually dealing with

Beyond the animal itself, drivers face a long list of challenges before the journey even begins:

- Loading facilities not up to standard – poor ramps, no lighting, poor access.
- Farmers not standing stock leading to excessive effluent, slippery floors, and animal distress – animal travel better after being stood of feed.
- No pre-warning for tall animals causing risk of injury and non-compliance.
- Incorrect or not enough info with pickup details wasting time, breaking logbook rules.
- Last-minute bookings with no details (no vet certs, no pens prepared and no plans).

And all of this is happening within a system that allows:

- Maximum 13-hour days.
- Mandatory 10-hour rest breaks.
- Strict 70-hour limits over seven days.

Drivers aren't just managing stock. They're managing time, risk, fatigue, and uncertainty and they're doing it to keep animals moving safely and within compliance.

Effluent: infrastructure and responsibility disconnect

The 2003 Industry Code of Practice on effluent management still guides today's practices – despite decades of change in, wash and dump access, road quality and traffic volume, and public scrutiny.

Real-world grey areas

- Not all Farmers stand stock properly before loading.
- Effluent is deemed “part of the load” yet, processing plants or saleyards rarely provide crate wash or effluent dump facilities.
- Effluent dumps are too few and far between across New Zealand.
- Drivers bear the fallout from non-compliance they didn't cause.

Reality check

- Fast-track regional effluent dump sites.
- Include effluent management in farmer education programs.
- Enable transporters to refuse loads without fear of commercial loss when preparation is inadequate.

Our drivers are professionals – but they're not veterinarians

Drivers are highly skilled stock handlers. They know pressure points, loading flows, animal behaviour, and how to keep stock calm and moving.

But they are not veterinarians.

They are not equipped to detect subtle lameness, nor can they see every tag in a mob of 600 lambs running at speed up a ramp.

We ask our veterinary colleagues to understand that drivers:

- Are often reacting to decisions made earlier in the chain.
- Work under tight time, safety, and compliance rules.
- Carry significant risk without equivalent authority.
- Often cannot refuse loads without risking commercial fallout.

What collaboration could look like

This paper isn't just about the challenges – it's about opportunity. What could be different? How can we do it better?

Is a solution having our industries working closer together to:

- Education and empathy: Understanding the full supply chain before assumptions are made.
- Joint workshops and 'social contracts' between farmers, transport operators, stock agents, sale yards, and meat processors would ensure all parties responsible for making decisions that impact on animal welfare have shared expectations and would help create a level playing field across the supply chain using a One Welfare approach.
- Shared pre-load assessments for high-risk loads.
- Better feedback loops: If something goes wrong, help trace it upstream – not just where the truck stopped.

We have a part to play together, if we all see each other as part of the same system, we'll get better outcomes and less frustration.

Call to action: let's work together to understand and navigate the grey

Livestock transport isn't black and white. The animal welfare space we all operate in is full of grey – not because people are careless, but because real-life decisions are made under pressure, in changing conditions.

New Zealand's livestock transport sector doesn't need more black-and-white thinking. It needs trust, teamwork, and a willingness to address the uncomfortable grey. By acknowledging the complexity and working *together*, we can build a system that delivers animal welfare *and* works in the real world.

If we want better welfare outcomes, we have to start with honest conversations about where those outcomes are being shaped – and how we can support the people tasked with delivering them. We want to do it better. But we also want fairness, collaboration, and shared accountability.

Because animal welfare isn't just what happens in the yards – it's about everything that leads to them. Because when it comes to animal welfare, we're not just transporting livestock – we're transporting responsibility.

And that load needs to be shared. Let's make that load lighter – together.