



Consider these tips when buying a stock trailer.

by Troy Smith, field editor

Auction yards, stock shows, county fairs and rodeos are places where you're apt to see a variety of conveyances used to transport livestock. Never mind those big 18-wheelers. We're talking about stock trailers hitched to pickup trucks, although some of those are rather big, too. They come in a variety of sizes. Some rigs are fancy, while others are plain. Occasionally seen is a mismatched outfit — a brand spanking new pickup dragging an ancient stock trailer, all rusty and rattling, or a shiny, new trailer towed by an old beat-up truck.

You can see all kinds at events that attract cattle folk, because so many of them own stock trailers and use them so frequently. Producers hit the road with trailers in tow to fetch purchased cattle to the farm or ranch and to deliver sale animals to market. Trailers transport animals to and from remote pastures and carry them to both planned and impromptu visits to the veterinary clinic. More than a few stock trailers have

been used to move teenagers off to college. For many farm and ranch families, a stock trailer is a versatile and nearly indispensable tool.

During this period of favorable cattle prices, many producers have been considering how to best invest some of their welcome profit in equipment upgrades. That might include buying a stock trailer that is newer, bigger or otherwise better suited to the operation. Of course, some producers routinely trade trailers, much like they periodically trade for newer cars and pickups. Whatever the reasons, trailer dealer Cliff Dailey enjoys a relatively brisk business at Cow Country Sales and Service, in Hyannis, Neb.

"A lot of our customers have taken advantage of good cattle prices to replace their older stock trailers. It's been hard to keep up with demand," states Dailey, who handles trailers from multiple manufacturers.

Dailey has towed

some trailers in his time. Previously a ranch cowboy turned ranch manager, Dailey turned businessman in 1997, establishing the trailer dealership that serves a clientele consisting primarily of western Nebraska cow and horse folk. He says veteran cattle producers usually have a pretty good idea of what they want in a new stock trailer, but they may be unfamiliar with some recent design innovations and certain options. They often seek Dailey's advice, as do people purchasing a stock trailer for the very first time.

Pulling the trailer

"The first question I ask a customer is, 'What will you be hauling?'" says Dailey. "The second thing I want to know is what kind of vehicle they will use to pull a trailer."

That's a sensible start to stock-trailer selection, according to University of Tennessee Professor Emeritus Clyde Lane. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association 2014 Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Educator of the Year, Lane was instrumental in the production of the BQA stock trailer transportation video.

"Expectations for the classes and numbers of cattle hauled will determine the size of trailer needed, but a producer also has to have enough truck to pull it. It's not hard to get more trailer than a (light-duty) truck can handle safely," explains Lane. "Matching a trailer with an inadequate tow vehicle increases the chances of having a breakdown or an accident that could injure humans, as well as animals. It's matter of safety, and with accidents there can be legal liability consequences, too."

While size does matter, so does a trailer's gross towed weight rating (GTWR). That does not represent payload capacity, but the combined weight of the trailer and cargo. Lane stresses that a stock trailer's GTWR must not be exceeded. He also recommends talking to the dealer about brakes, since stock



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trailers may be equipped with electric brakes or electrically actuated hydraulic brakes.

“The electric over hydraulic brakes cost more money,” notes Dailey. “I believe they are better, though, because there is minimal delay between the time a driver steps on the brake pedal and when the trailer brakes take hold.”

Trailer design

Producer preference has trended toward gooseneck trailers, rather than bumper-pull models, and Lane calls it a positive trend. He notes how a gooseneck hitch allows that portion of loaded trailer weight carried by the tow vehicle to be more evenly distributed over both sets of its axles. That increases stability, safety and ride comfort for tow-vehicle passengers, as well as animals in the trailer.

“Goosenecks are the most popular by far,” agrees Dailey. “Twenty-four feet is the most popular length for the gooseneck trailers we sell. Most manufacturers offer a ‘bull package,’ meaning trailers equipped that way are stouter-made and have axles with a heavy weight rating. Usually, you can pull a 24-footer like that with a ¾-ton pickup and haul 10 to 12 mature cows. That kind of trailer and load capacity fits the needs of most of our rancher customers.”

Today’s trailer shoppers also must decide whether to buy a model constructed of steel or aluminum-alloy. Aluminum has become increasingly popular because it is lighter in weight and more resistant to corrosion. Aluminum doesn’t have to be painted, although an acid wash is necessary every few years to maintain a bright finish. Steel’s fiercest enemy is rust, but many manufacturers are employing newer painting



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► **Above:** Fitted with increasingly popular “brush fenders” and a canvas top, this no-frills, cowboy kind of trailer is suited for use in rough country.

► **Below:** This type of steel trailer is commonly seen in cattle country. Steel stock trailers are popular, particularly among price-conscious buyers and those who drag trailers over many miles of two-track trails and across rough pastures.



processes and surface finishes to help slow the process.

Coffee-shop and chute-side debates sometimes erupt over the durability of aluminum compared to steel. Some producers think aluminum trailers do not hold up as well under heavy use, particularly when subjected to a lot of off-road travel. Perhaps the most common complaints stem from cracks due to metal fatigue and broken welds.

Despite that, and the fact that aluminum trailers typically cost a third to half again more than steel models, Dailey says demand for aluminum stock trailers continues to grow. Many of his aluminum trailer customers claim they would never go back to steel.

“I think aluminum trailer design and construction has improved over the years, although riveted construction may be more durable than welded construction,” Dailey offers. “Maintained properly, an aluminum trailer can last a long, long time, and the resale value is better than steel — quite a bit better.”

Dailey still sells plenty of steel stock trailers, though, particularly to price-

conscious buyers and those who drag trailers over many miles of two-track trails and across rough pastures. For use under those conditions, sales are trending toward steel trailers with brush fenders and pipe-rail or slatted sides.

Working conditions may be a consideration when choosing the type of suspension, too. For a smoother cargo ride and better handling while hauling cattle down most roads, Dailey recommends torsion axles. However, producers who frequently pull trailers over poor roads or go where no roads exist may prefer axles with traditional leaf springs. The latter type of suspension may require more maintenance, but can be repaired. If a torsion axle does fail, it cannot be fixed and must be replaced.

Type of flooring is another consideration. Many aluminum trailers also have aluminum floors, but some manufacturers offer wood or rubber-plastic composite flooring as options. Wood-plank flooring is standard for most steel stock trailers, with composite flooring as a potential option.

Lane and Dailey agree that wood may require more maintenance, because wood

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rots. The hardness of the wood from which floor planks are cut can make some difference in longevity. Depending on the manufacturer, planks may be oak, fir or pine, with pine being the softest and, typically, subject to more rapid deterioration. Wood flooring that has been pressure-treated with a preservative, or painted, will resist the effects of moisture and barnyard acid longer. When the time comes, wood flooring is relatively inexpensive to repair.

According to Dailey, composite flooring won't rot like wood, but it is heavier and may require more cross-members underneath. It all adds weight to the trailer. Aluminum flooring is lightweight and more resilient than wood, but it is not immune to

corrosion caused by urine and manure.

Regardless of flooring material, frequent cleaning will extend its useful life.

Customization

Many trailer manufacturers offer options allowing buyers to customize their purchase. Rather than a single interior divider-gate that is standard equipment on many models, additional gates may be available. Rear gate styles include split, double-hinged (butterfly) gates or a single full-swing gate. The latter may also include an integrated slide or roll-up gate. For the sake of safety, Dailey and Lane recommend positive slam latches, so gates can be secured quickly without fumbling with a latch lever or pin.

Lane also advises consideration of whether a trailer is equipped with a spare tire carrier, and does its location allow safe and easy access to the spare when the trailer is loaded?

Speaking of tires, it's important that trailers be equipped with the proper kind. While 10-ply tires were once standard, Dailey says most manufacturers now equip stock trailers with 12- or 14-ply special trailer (ST) tires, which have heavier sidewalls than passenger car tires. A new trailer should have new tires, but Lane advises prospective buyers to examine the tires on any trailer that might have been sitting on a dealer's lot for a considerable length of time. That's because tire failure often is a function of time and exposure to the elements, rather than wear.

“I recommend checking to see when the tires were manufactured,” adds Lane. “Printed on every tire is a DOT (Department of Transportation) identification number, with the last four digits indicating the month and year of manufacture. If I were buying a trailer, I’d prefer that the tires were manufactured in the last six months.”

Used stock trailers

Careful scrutiny of the tires is particularly important when considering the purchase of a used stock trailer, but Lane and Dailey advise conscientious inspection of the following:

- ▶ Look underneath to see if the frame or axles are bent. Check for breaks in welds or leaf-spring suspension.
- ▶ Look at rusted areas on steel trailers, particularly at the base of the trailer’s

front and side panels where manure accumulates most. Check aluminum trailers for excessive pitting and corrosion.

- ▶ Examine floors for rot, cracks or corrosion.
- ▶ Check wheel bearings.
- ▶ Make sure the trailer’s hitch operates properly and safety chains are present and complete.
- ▶ Check electrical wiring and determine whether trailer lights and brakes work properly.

According to Dailey, something to remember when inspecting a trailer’s undercarriage is that a slight upward bow in the axles does not mean they are bent. They are supposed to be that way.

“If inspection of a trailer’s tires indicate uneven wear, it’s usually a sign that the axles

or spindles are either out of line or bent. Axles can be straightened at a qualified alignment shop; spindles cannot,” adds Dailey. “When I send a trailer to have the axles ‘bent’ back into shape, [the shop technicians] will align the wheels to the hitch ball, so the trailer will not dog-track when towed. It makes the trailer pull easier.”

Before buying any trailer, Lane recommends asking the dealer for permission to hitch it up and pull the trailer down the road for a few miles.

“See how it pulls behind your vehicle when the trailer is empty,” advises Lane. “If you don’t like it then, you’re probably not going to like it when it’s loaded.”



Editor’s Note: *Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.*