

Animal Transport: Congress Should Consider Modernizing the Law to Better Protect Livestock

GAO-26-108123
Q&A Report to Congressional Requesters
June 4, 2026

Accessible Version

Why This Matters

Hundreds of millions of livestock animals, such as cattle, goats, horses, mules, pigs, and sheep, are transported each year, primarily by truck (see fig. 1). These trips occur for various purposes, such as slaughter, auctions, shows, breeding, and fattening. Transport of livestock animals can cover thousands of miles, potentially exposing these animals to overcrowding, extreme temperatures, limited ventilation, and a lack of access to water or food. If not managed properly, these conditions can lead to injury, illness, or death.

Figure 1: Truck Transporting Sheep on a U.S. Highway



Source: M. Perfectti/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-26-108123

In 1873, Congress passed the original version of the Twenty-Eight Hour law. Then and now, the law generally prohibits the confinement of animals in interstate transport for more than 28 consecutive hours without humanely unloading them for feeding, water, and rest, with certain exceptions. The law was subsequently both repealed and reenacted in 1906 and 1994. Under this law, the Department of Justice (DOJ) is responsible for pursuing civil penalties for violations. Under separate authorities, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates certain aspects of livestock animal health, and the Department of Transportation (DOT) regulates motor carrier safety.

We were asked to assess federal agencies' efforts to oversee the transport of livestock animals. This report addresses factors that could lead to cruelty to livestock animals during transport and federal implementation and enforcement of the Twenty-Eight Hour law.

Key Takeaways

- The Twenty-Eight Hour law is the primary federal law addressing the interstate transport of livestock animals in the U.S. As provided by Congress in 1873 and 1906, the stated purpose of the law was to prevent cruelty to animals during transport.
- We identified six factors that, if addressed, could help prevent cruelty to livestock animals during transport. The Twenty-Eight Hour law partly covers one of these factors. Congress has not amended the law to include other factors since the law was originally enacted.
- USDA has taken limited action to monitor the interstate transport of livestock animals for compliance with the Twenty-Eight Hour law. DOT has not taken any action because of limits on its authority to regulate such transport, according to DOT officials.
- From 2013 through 2025, USDA referred one case involving a potential violation of the Twenty-Eight Hour law to DOJ for enforcement, but no enforcement action was taken in that case. In general, the penalties are too low to incentivize enforcement, according to DOJ officials.
- We recommend that Congress consider amending the Twenty-Eight Hour law to (1) address other factors, such as those we identified, that could help prevent cruelty to livestock animals during transport; (2) authorize federal agencies to monitor interstate transport of livestock animals and specify their roles and responsibilities; and (3) enhance the penalties and add administrative enforcement mechanisms. Doing so would enhance federal agencies' ability to prevent cruelty to livestock animals during interstate transport and better position Congress to hold federal agencies accountable.

What is the history, purpose, and scope of the Twenty-Eight Hour law?

The Twenty-Eight Hour law is the primary federal law that addresses the interstate transport of livestock animals within the U.S.¹ After originally passing the law in 1873, Congress both repealed and reenacted the law in 1906 and again in 1994 as part of general efforts to organize and codify U.S. laws. Historically, the purpose and scope of the Twenty-Eight Hour law has been to prevent cruelty to cattle, sheep, swine, and "other animals" during transport.²

The current Twenty-Eight Hour law, reenacted in 1994, prohibits carriers transporting animals in interstate commerce from confining animals in a vehicle or vessel for more than 28 consecutive hours without humanely unloading the animals for feeding, water, and rest for at least 5 consecutive hours, with certain exceptions.³ For example, the law specifies that the 28-hour confinement may be extended if animals cannot be unloaded because of an accident or other unavoidable causes.⁴

Regarding enforcement, the 1873 law made it the duty of U.S. marshals to prosecute all violations. The 1906 law modified the requirement to make it the duty of U.S. attorneys to prosecute all cases reported by the Secretary of Agriculture, or that came to their knowledge by other means.

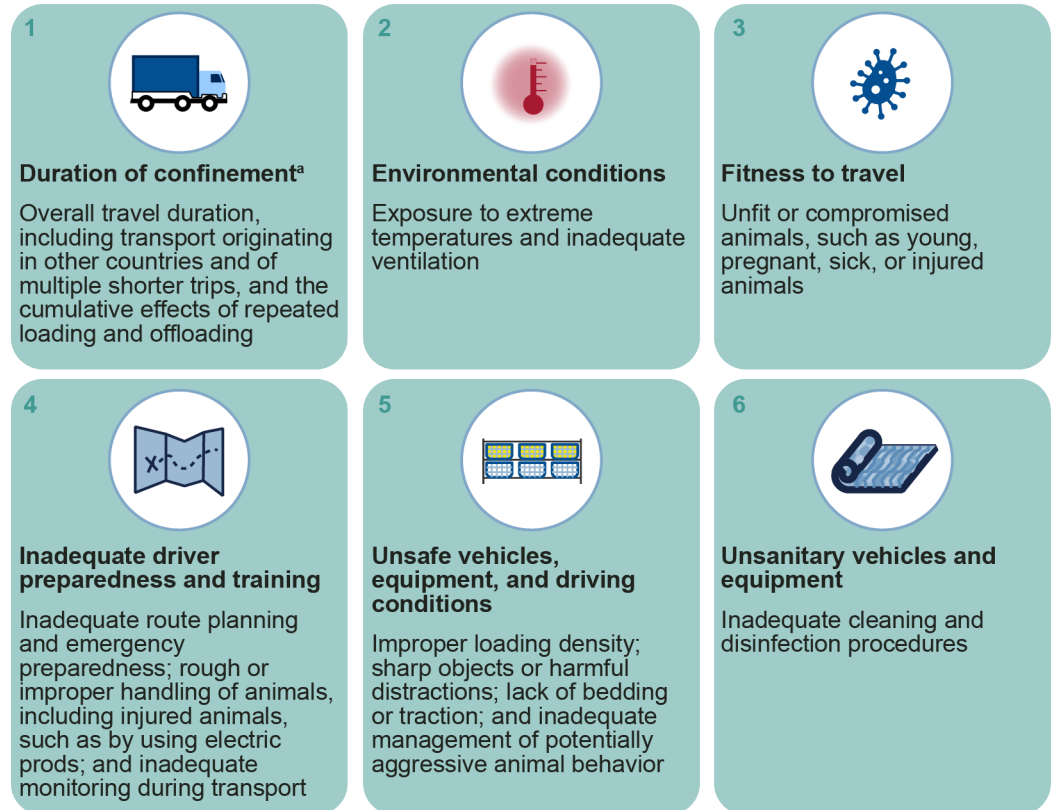
Currently, the law sets civil penalties, which may be assessed if the transporter willfully and knowingly violates this law. On learning of a violation, the Attorney General is to bring a civil action (i.e., action that requires a judicial hearing) to collect the penalty. In 1994, Congress codified the law in the transportation title of the U.S. Code and removed reference to the Secretary of Agriculture. The law

does not currently specify how the Attorney General may become aware of a potential violation and what role, if any, DOT or USDA should play to monitor compliance with the law and bring enforcement actions.

What are factors that, if addressed, could help prevent cruelty to livestock animals during transport?

We identified six factors that, if addressed, could help prevent cruelty to livestock animals during transport. We identified these factors by analyzing the documents and views of federal agencies and stakeholders, such as livestock industry, veterinary, and animal welfare organizations, and the results of a literature review. The factors are shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Six Factors We Identified That, if Addressed, Could Help to Prevent Cruelty to Livestock Animals During Transport



Source: GAO analysis of agencies' and stakeholders' documentation and views and results of literature review. | GAO-26-108123

Alt text for Figure 2: Six Factors We Identified That, if Addressed, Could Help to Prevent Cruelty to Livestock Animals During Transport

1	Duration of confinement. A Overall travel duration, including transport originating in other countries and of multiple shorter trips, and the cumulative effects of repeated loading and offloading
2	Environmental conditions. Exposure to extreme temperatures and inadequate ventilation
3	Fitness to travel. Unfit or compromised animals, such as young, pregnant, sick, or injured animals
4	Inadequate driver preparedness and training. Inadequate route planning and emergency preparedness; rough or improper handling of animals, including injured animals, such as by using electric prods; and inadequate monitoring during transport
5	Unsafe vehicles, equipment, and driving conditions. Improper loading density; sharp objects or harmful distractions; lack of bedding or traction; and inadequate management of potentially aggressive animal behavior
6	Unsanitary vehicles and equipment. Inadequate cleaning and disinfection procedures

Source: GAO analysis of agencies' and stakeholders' documentation and views and results of literature review. | GAO-26-108123

^aThe Twenty-Eight Hour law limits the confinement of animals in interstate transport to 28 consecutive hours, with certain exceptions, without humanely unloading the animals to provide food, rest, and water for a minimum of 5 hours.

These factors have been adopted into guidance, best practices, and international standards. For example:

- **USDA guidance.** USDA issued guidance in 2022, under a separate law, on the international movement of animals, which addresses factors other than duration of confinement for livestock animals.⁵ The guidance reflects the additional factors that this separate law addresses, such as ensuring vehicles are sanitary, driving conditions are safe, and livestock are treated humanely. For example, the guidance specifies that USDA personnel at U.S. land borders should determine whether the conditions during transport are not likely to endanger the livestock animals' fitness to travel. In addition, USDA's guidance recommends that transporters develop a comprehensive contingency plan that addresses other factors, such as loading densities and environmental conditions.
- **Industry and veterinary best practices.** Livestock industry group representatives told us they train, certify, and audit association members to ensure compliance with industry best practices for promoting the safe handling and welfare of livestock animals. In addition, in 2024, a veterinary group issued a policy supporting the humane transport of animals. This policy recommended evidence-based best practices that, at a minimum, address the humane transport of animals, including livestock, such as determining that the animals are fit for transportation and ensuring that handling methods and equipment minimize stress and injury.⁶
- **International standards.** Other countries, such as Australia, Canada, and Mexico, and the European Union require, among other factors, the fitness of livestock animals to travel. Further, the World Organization for Animal Health, the international standards-setting body for animal health and disease control, specifies several factors to consider for protecting livestock animals during transport by land in its standards, including ensuring the fitness of livestock animals to travel based on health and age (see app. I).

To what extent does the Twenty-Eight Hour law address these factors?

We found that the law partly addresses one of the factors (i.e., duration of confinement during transport). However, it does not address certain aspects of this factor. Specifically, the law does not address the duration of transport that originates in other countries or of multiple shorter trips that individually do not reach the 28-hour limit and the cumulative effects of repeated loading and offloading. Further, we found that the law does not address the other five factors we identified that, if addressed, could help prevent cruelty to livestock animals during transport: environmental conditions; fitness to travel; inadequate driver preparedness and training; unsafe vehicles, equipment, and driving conditions; and unsanitary vehicles and equipment.⁷

The law does not address factors other than an aspect of duration of confinement during transport because Congress has not amended the Twenty-Eight Hour law to address other factors since the law's initial enactment. By amending the law or passing new legislation to address other factors, Congress could enhance federal agencies' ability to prevent cruelty to livestock animals during interstate transport.

Further, industry and other stakeholders have noted that addressing these factors provides multiple safety and health benefits. For example, a livestock marketing organization's guideline describes how handling livestock in a manner to avoid as much stress as possible and avoiding rough or improper handling could help prevent injuries to livestock animals and employees. Similarly, a swine industry best practices document states that swine do not have the ability to sweat or have a thick coat of hair, making them sensitive to heat and cold stress.

As a result, according to this document, exposure to extreme temperatures can cause swine to become non-ambulatory or dead on arrival. An animal welfare organization reported that transporting unfit livestock animals can result in greater risk of disseminating and transmitting pathogens.

According to industry groups, addressing these factors can also have economic benefits. For example, livestock industry representatives told us the longer that livestock animals travel without food or water, the more weight loss they experience, which may reduce their value for slaughter. In addition, sick, injured, or dead livestock animals are rejected at slaughter facilities. Cattle industry representatives also told us that the livestock industry wants to avoid negative public perceptions that could affect consumer attitudes. Finally, these representatives told us preventing the spread of disease, including during transport, is important to avoid broader economic losses.

A veterinary group we spoke to told us that the Twenty-Eight Hour law does not directly address the welfare of the animals because it does not impose any requirements tailored to the needs of different types of animals. Officials from an animal welfare organization noted that, in their view, the Twenty-Eight Hour law should be amended to add requirements to address animals' fitness to travel.

To what extent do USDA and DOT monitor compliance with the law?

USDA has taken limited action and DOT has not taken any action to monitor compliance with the Twenty-Eight Hour law, a necessary step to refer potential violations to DOJ.

USDA has an ad hoc process for identifying potential violations. Specifically, USDA's food safety inspectors at federally inspected slaughter facilities are to report potential violations of the law through their chain of command so that the department can conduct an investigation.⁸ USDA's guidance states that if livestock animals arriving on a transport vehicle appear exhausted or dehydrated, inspectors should seek to determine whether the truck driver stopped within the preceding 28 hours to provide the animals rest, food, and water. However, the guidelines do not require food safety inspectors to witness the arrival of all livestock animals at slaughter facilities.

Separately, USDA's guidance on the international movement of animals directs USDA veterinarians or designees to supervise any necessary offloading of livestock animals at any of the three USDA-approved Feed, Water, and Rest stations (see app. II).⁹ However, USDA personnel do not monitor livestock animals transported to other locations, such as feedlots.

In a 2025 report to a congressional committee, USDA stated that the department has not taken additional actions to monitor compliance because its current regulatory authority, resources, and monitoring techniques for truck shipments are insufficient to detect violations.¹⁰ According to this report, USDA does not currently have the authority to regulate animal welfare for domestically transported livestock animals, such as by requiring documents that would enable it to determine the duration of transport.¹¹ Further, in September 2025, USDA announced that it planned to rescind a rule that it issued in 1963 about feed at livestock rest stations because, according to agency officials, USDA's Office of the General Counsel concluded that the Twenty-Eight Hour law does not grant USDA authority to issue rules related to animal transport.¹²

DOT regulates the operation of commercial motor vehicles. However, DOT officials stated that DOT does not monitor the confinement of livestock animals during transport because the department does not have the authority or resources to do so and its role is to ensure highway safety, not animal welfare.

DOT's Hours of Service regulations, under a separate authority, limit the number of hours that drivers may operate commercial vehicles.¹³ However, DOT's ability to collect information that could be used to monitor compliance with the Twenty-Eight Hour law under this other authority may be limited. For example, DOT's Hours of Service regulations exempt transporters of agricultural commodities, such as livestock animals, in certain situations.¹⁴ According to DOT officials, minimizing breaks for the drivers helps to ensure livestock arrive at their destination more quickly and thus protects the value of the livestock. In addition, for fiscal years 2018 through 2026, annual appropriations laws have prohibited DOT from using federal funds to require the use of electronic logging devices for transporters of livestock animals to show compliance with DOT's Hours of Service regulations.¹⁵

By authorizing federal agencies to monitor trucks engaged in the interstate transport of livestock animals and specifying agencies' roles and responsibilities, including the authority to issue specific regulations, Congress would be better positioned to hold federal agencies accountable for ensuring compliance with the law.

To what extent have federal agencies taken action to enforce the law from 2013 through 2025?

From 2013 through 2025, USDA referred one case involving a potential violation of the Twenty-Eight Hour law to DOJ for enforcement. According to DOJ officials, the department coordinated with USDA and jointly determined that filing a civil action to collect a penalty was not appropriate in that case. For more information about USDA investigations and DOJ enforcement actions, see appendix III.

As of April 2026, the minimum penalty was \$206 and the maximum was \$1,055 for each violation. Other than adjustments for inflation, Congress has not updated the civil penalty amounts since 1873. The Supreme Court has interpreted the penalties to be per shipment rather than per animal. According to DOJ officials, the penalties are too low to incentivize enforcement due to limited agency resources and the high costs of pursuing civil cases. DOT officials noted that at their current level, the penalties do not serve as a meaningful deterrent to potential violators.

Until recently, USDA took various administrative enforcement actions, including issuing regulatory correspondences, such as warning letters to transporters—which advise that USDA may seek penalties if the alleged violations continue—when the department identified potential violations of the law. Such administrative enforcement actions differ from DOJ's civil enforcement authority to seek penalties in that they do not require action before a court.

However, in 2022, USDA and DOJ concluded that the law did not authorize any agency to take such administrative enforcement actions for animal transport violations, including issuing warning letters. USDA officials told us that, following this conclusion, their department is no longer taking such administrative enforcement actions.

According to DOT officials and representatives from an animal welfare organization we interviewed, authorizing a federal agency, such as USDA, to take administrative actions could incentivize agency enforcement and transporter compliance while requiring fewer agency resources. For example, according to an animal welfare organization we interviewed, it is difficult for federal agencies to meet the burden of proving that a transporter knowingly and willfully violated the law, a necessary standard for a civil action under the Twenty-Eight Hour law. By enhancing the civil penalties or specifically authorizing relevant federal agencies to take administrative enforcement actions, Congress would better enable and incentivize federal agencies to enforce the law.

Conclusions

Livestock animals are transported for various purposes, such as slaughter, auctions, shows, breeding, and fattening. These trips, primarily by truck, can span many hours and thousands of miles, potentially exposing livestock to overcrowding, extreme temperatures, limited ventilation, and lack of access to water or food, among other things. If not managed properly, these conditions can lead to injury, illness, or death. The Twenty-Eight Hour law is the primary federal law covering the transport of livestock animals in the U.S. Historically, its purpose and scope has been to prevent cruelty to livestock animals during interstate transport.

However, the law only partly covers one of the six factors we identified that could help to prevent such cruelty. Addressing these factors could better protect the health and welfare of livestock animals during transport, limit the spread of disease, and reduce potential economic losses, according to industry and veterinary groups. In addition, the law does not authorize USDA and DOT to monitor the interstate transport of livestock animals for compliance—a necessary step for being able to refer potential violations to DOJ. Finally, the enforcement mechanisms under the law are insufficient to incentivize federal enforcement and ensure compliance with its limits.

By amending the law or enacting new legislation to address factors, such as the six we identified, and by enhancing the penalties and expanding agencies' authority to monitor and enforce the law, Congress would enhance federal agencies' abilities to prevent cruelty to livestock animals during interstate transport and would be better positioned to hold the agencies accountable for ensuring compliance with the law.

Matters for Congressional Consideration

We are recommending the following three matters for congressional consideration:

Congress should consider amending the Twenty-Eight Hour law or passing new legislation to address factors that could help prevent cruelty to livestock animals during interstate transport, such as those we identified. (Matter for Consideration 1)

Congress should consider amending the Twenty-Eight Hour law to authorize federal agencies to monitor interstate transport of livestock animals and specify their roles and responsibilities. (Matter for Consideration 2)

Congress should consider amending the Twenty-Eight Hour law to enhance the penalties and specifically authorize federal agencies to take administrative enforcement actions. (Matter for Consideration 3)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOJ, DOT, and USDA for review and comment. DOJ and DOT provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. USDA told us it had no comments on the draft report.

How GAO Did This Study

To address our questions, we reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance related to agencies' implementation and enforcement of the Twenty-Eight Hour law, such as USDA's Twenty-Eight Hour law regulations and guidance for regulating the international movement of animals.

To identify factors that, if addressed, could help prevent cruelty to animals during transport, we obtained and analyzed documents, when provided, and views from a sample of 17 nonfederal stakeholders and other sources (e.g., World Organization for Animal Health standards and training manuals). We identified these nonfederal stakeholders through an iterative process that involved

selecting a core group of stakeholders and surveying them for the names of others they would recommend (often referred to as the “snowball sampling” technique). Our sample included representatives of different segments of the livestock industry, states, veterinary groups, and an animal welfare organization.

We judgmentally grouped information from these documents and views into six factors for reporting purposes. The six factors we identified are not intended to be comprehensive. We also conducted a literature review to corroborate the results of our analysis.¹⁶ The views of selected nonfederal stakeholders are not generalizable to all stakeholders, but provide illustrative examples of factors that, if addressed, could help prevent cruelty to animals during transport. We compared these factors to the provisions of the law to determine the extent to which they are addressed in law.

To identify examples of livestock transport protections in other countries and international jurisdictions, we reviewed a legal analysis conducted by the Law Library of Congress. Such protections included, for example, the number of consecutive hours livestock may remain confined for transport, treatment of livestock during transport, and rule enforcement.

To provide illustrative examples of animal handling practices during transport, we also conducted site visits to two of the three operable USDA-approved Feed, Water, and Rest stations. Specifically, after receiving permission from station managers and coordinating with USDA, state officials, and industry groups, we visited stations in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Middletown, Pennsylvania. At each location we interviewed station managers or owners and observed their facilities. In addition, we visited a livestock market auction in Pennsylvania to observe the loading and unloading of livestock animals.

To understand steps that federal agencies have taken to monitor compliance with and enforce the Twenty-Eight Hour law, we interviewed officials from USDA, DOJ, and DOT, as well as representatives from our sample of nonfederal stakeholders. For example, we asked these officials and representatives about federal agencies’ roles and responsibilities and challenges.

To identify potential violations of the Twenty-Eight Hour law, we obtained and analyzed data from USDA for calendar years 2013 through 2025 from USDA. We assessed the reliability of the data by obtaining written responses from knowledgeable officials about, for example, the accuracy and completeness of case information, data entry responsibilities, and data limitations. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for our reporting purpose. We mapped the 11 USDA investigative cases for which the origin and destination cities were identified, were within the United States, and covered distances over 1,000 miles.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2025 to June 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Cory Booker
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Commodities, Derivatives, Risk Management, and Trade
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

The Honorable Dina Titus

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Transportation, the Attorney General, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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Appendix I: Protection of Livestock During Transport in Selected Countries

We summarized information from a 2026 report from the Law Library of Congress that surveyed how 13 countries and international jurisdictions protect livestock animals during transport.¹⁷ Table 1 shows examples of livestock transport protections in three of these countries—Australia, Canada, and Mexico—and the European Union.¹⁸ These protections address a variety of factors such as transport duration limits for specific types of livestock animals; prohibitions based on fitness to travel; and other considerations such as ensuring that vehicles and equipment used for transport are safe.

Jurisdiction	Examples of transport duration limits by type of livestock animal	Examples of fitness to travel limits	Examples of other factors that could protect livestock animals during transport
Australia	<p>Maximum time without water and minimum rest durations for different classes within major commercial livestock species, including alpacas, cattle, horses, pigs, poultry, and sheep.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alpacas up to 6 months old: 4 hours without water and a requirement for a minimum 12-hour rest with water, food, and space to lie down. Cattle over 6 months old: 48 hours without water and a requirement for a minimum 36-hour rest with water, food, and space to lie down. 	<p>The person in charge of transport must manage time without water to minimize risk to the welfare of the livestock, according to an assessment of whether the livestock are fit for the remainder of the intended journey, among other things.</p>	<p>There are identified responsibilities of the transporter including loading and final inspection of livestock to assess fitness for the intended journey and follow loading density standards.</p>

Jurisdiction	Examples of transport duration limits by type of livestock animal	Examples of fitness to travel limits	Examples of other factors that could protect livestock animals during transport
Canada	<p>Transport time and feed, water, and rest duration limits, according to species, age, and the condition of the livestock.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compromised livestock: 12 hours without feed, water, and rest.^a • Turkeys: 36 hours without feed, water, and rest. 	<p>Unfit livestock—those likely to suffer during transport—cannot be loaded or transported, unless they are going for veterinary care.</p> <p>Unfit examples include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • livestock with fractures that impede mobility and • stressed hogs that tremble. 	<p>No person shall beat, strike, whip, or kick an animal; use a prod, whip, or other driving device in a manner likely to cause suffering, injury, or death; or use such a device to make an animal move if it does not have a clear path.</p>
European Union	<p>Transport duration limits for specific species.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unweaned calves, lambs, kids, and foals: Two consecutive 9-hour periods (18 hours total) with 1 hour of rest after the first period with liquid and feed. • Pigs: 24 hours with continuous access to water. • Sheep: Two consecutive 14-hour periods (28 hours total) with 1 hour of rest after the first period. 	<p>Unfit livestock</p> <p>Examples include livestock</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unable to walk independently without pain, • with open wounds, and • that have given birth within the previous week. 	<p>The means of transport must be designed, constructed, maintained, and operated to avoid injury and suffering.</p> <p>Contains specific space (i.e., density) requirements, which vary by species and means of transport.</p>
Mexico	<p>Transport time limits, according to species. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lambs: 8 hours without rest and offer of water and food. • Cattle: 18 hours without rest and drinking water, followed by a rest period of at least 3 hours. 	<p>Unfit livestock</p> <p>Examples include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • livestock that cannot stand upright or are sick or injured;^b • pregnant females, when it is certain that the birth will occur during the journey; and • offspring that are still dependent on their mothers for food and care, unless they are moved together. 	<p>Livestock must not be hit with any object that could cause trauma during the herding and should be inspected periodically along the route to detect those that are lying down to protect them from being trampled or suffering further injuries such as bruises or fractures.</p>

Source: GAO summary of information included in a 2026 Law Library of Congress report. | GAO-26-108123

Note: We reviewed the Law Library of Congress report to identify examples of its findings in other countries. See Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Directorate, *Protection of Livestock During Transport*, LL File No. 2026-024711 (Jan. 2026). See <https://www.loc.gov/item/2026291250/>.

^aUnder Canadian regulations, a “compromised” animal is defined as one that shows reduced capacity to withstand transport due to specific conditions. This includes, for example, those that are bloated without signs of discomfort or weakness, those with acute frostbite, or those blind in both eyes. It also covers animals that have not fully healed after procedures such as dehorning, detusking, or castration, and those that are lame in ways not classified as “unfit.”

^bExceptions include when mobilization is due to an emergency or to take the animals to a site to receive medical treatment, provided that moving them does not pose an animal health risk.

According to the Law Library of Congress report, competent authorities (e.g., government agencies) may sanction noncompliance with the transport rules within each of their jurisdictions (e.g., country). Sanctions range from administrative penalties, including fines, as in Mexico, to prosecution with the possibility of imprisonment, as in Canada and selected states in Australia. In addition, European Union member states must regulate “effective, proportionate and dissuasive” sanctions, but may decide what type of sanctions will have that effect.

Additionally, the World Organization for Animal Health sets standards for ensuring the fitness of livestock animals to travel.¹⁹ For example, the standards recommend the following:

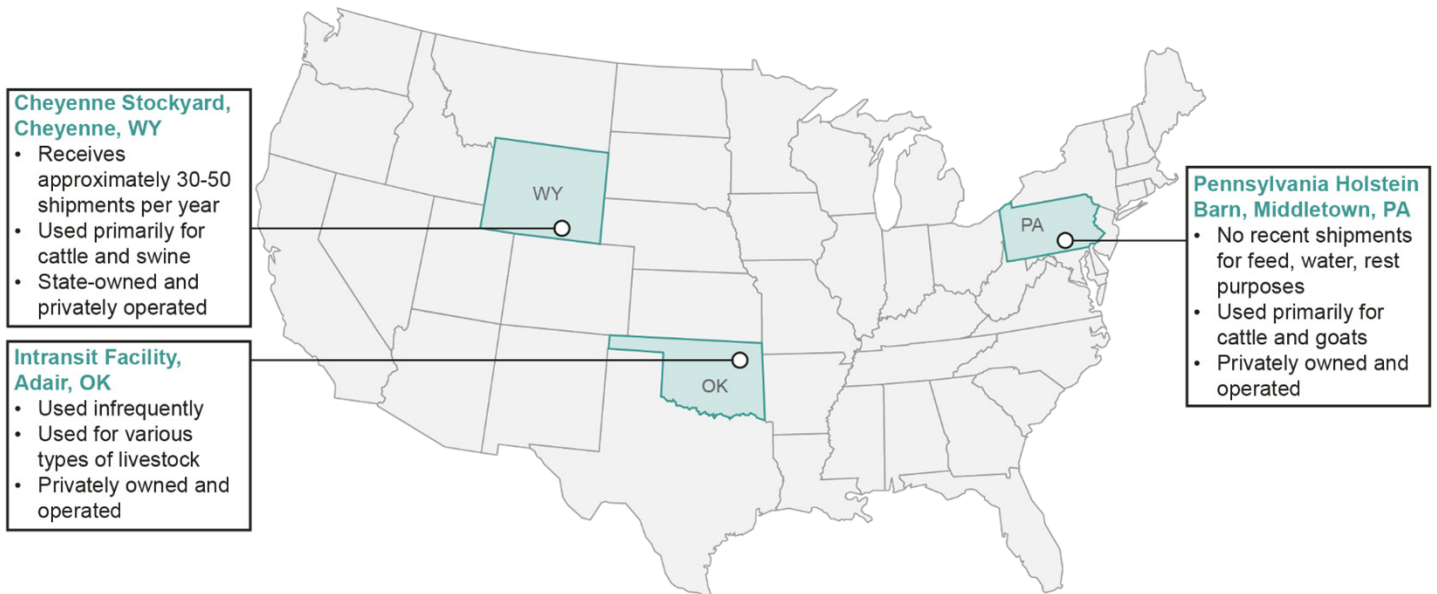
- The maximum duration of transport should be determined according to factors such as space allowance and environmental conditions (i.e., weather).

- Suitable water and feed should be available as appropriate given the livestock animal's species, age, and condition, as well as the duration of the transport and environmental conditions.
- Certain animals are deemed unfit to travel, such as animals that are sick, injured, weak, disabled or fatigued; are pregnant or newly born under certain circumstances; or cannot be moved without causing additional suffering.
- Vehicles should be designed appropriately to minimize risks from extreme temperatures and livestock animals should not be transported at all in some extreme conditions.
- Design of new loading and unloading facilities or modification of existing facilities should aim to minimize the potential for distractions that may cause approaching animals to stop, balk, or turn back.
- Handlers should be experienced and competent in handling and moving livestock animals and understand their behavior patterns and the underlying principles necessary to carry out their tasks.
- Contingency plans should be developed and kept up to date to address emergencies (including adverse weather conditions) and minimize stress during transport.

Appendix II: Information About USDA-Approved Feed, Water, and Rest Stations

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials and nonfederal stakeholders, there are three operable, USDA-approved Feed, Water, and Rest stations. The Feed, Water, and Rest station at the Cheyenne Stockyard in Wyoming is the only one that receives regular shipments of livestock animals for Feed, Water, and Rest station purposes (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Information About U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-Approved Feed, Water, and Rest Stations for Livestock, as of February 2026

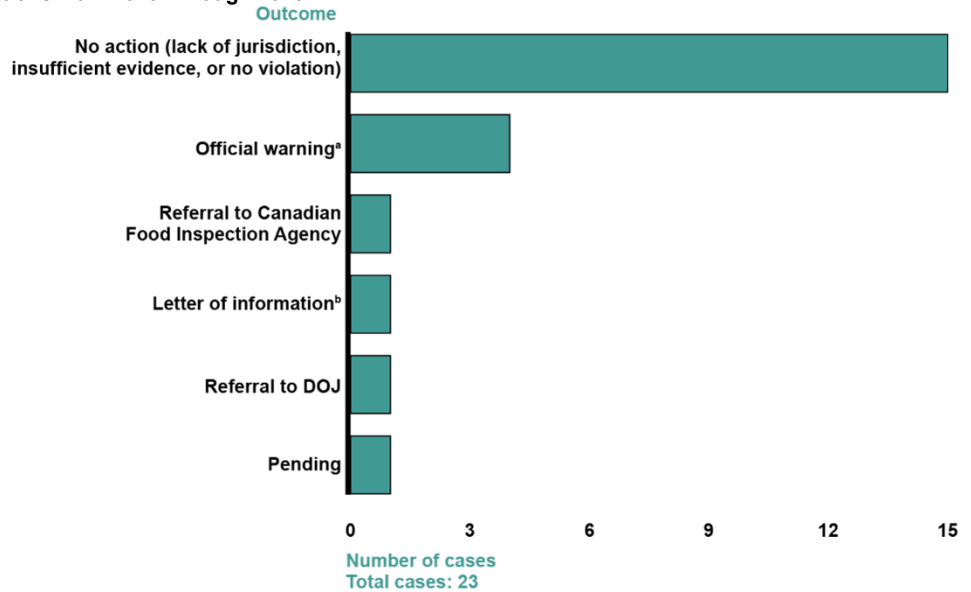


Sources: GAO analysis of information from USDA and site operators; Map Resources (map). | GAO-26-108123

**Appendix III:
Information About
USDA Investigations
and Enforcement
Actions**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) initiated 23 cases investigating possible violations of the Twenty-Eight Hour law from calendar years 2013 through 2025 (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Outcomes of USDA Cases Involving Investigations into Potential Twenty-Eight Hour Law Violations from 2013 Through 2025



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-26-108123

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Outcomes of USDA Cases Involving Investigations into Potential Twenty-Eight Hour Law Violations from 2013 Through 2025

Outcome	Number of cases
No action (lack of jurisdiction, insufficient evidence, or no violation)	15
Official warning ^a	4
Referral to Canadian Food Inspection Agency	1
Letter of information ^b	1
Referral to DOJ	1
Pending	1
Total	23

Source: GAO analysis of information from USDA and site operators; Map Resources (map). | GAO-26-108123

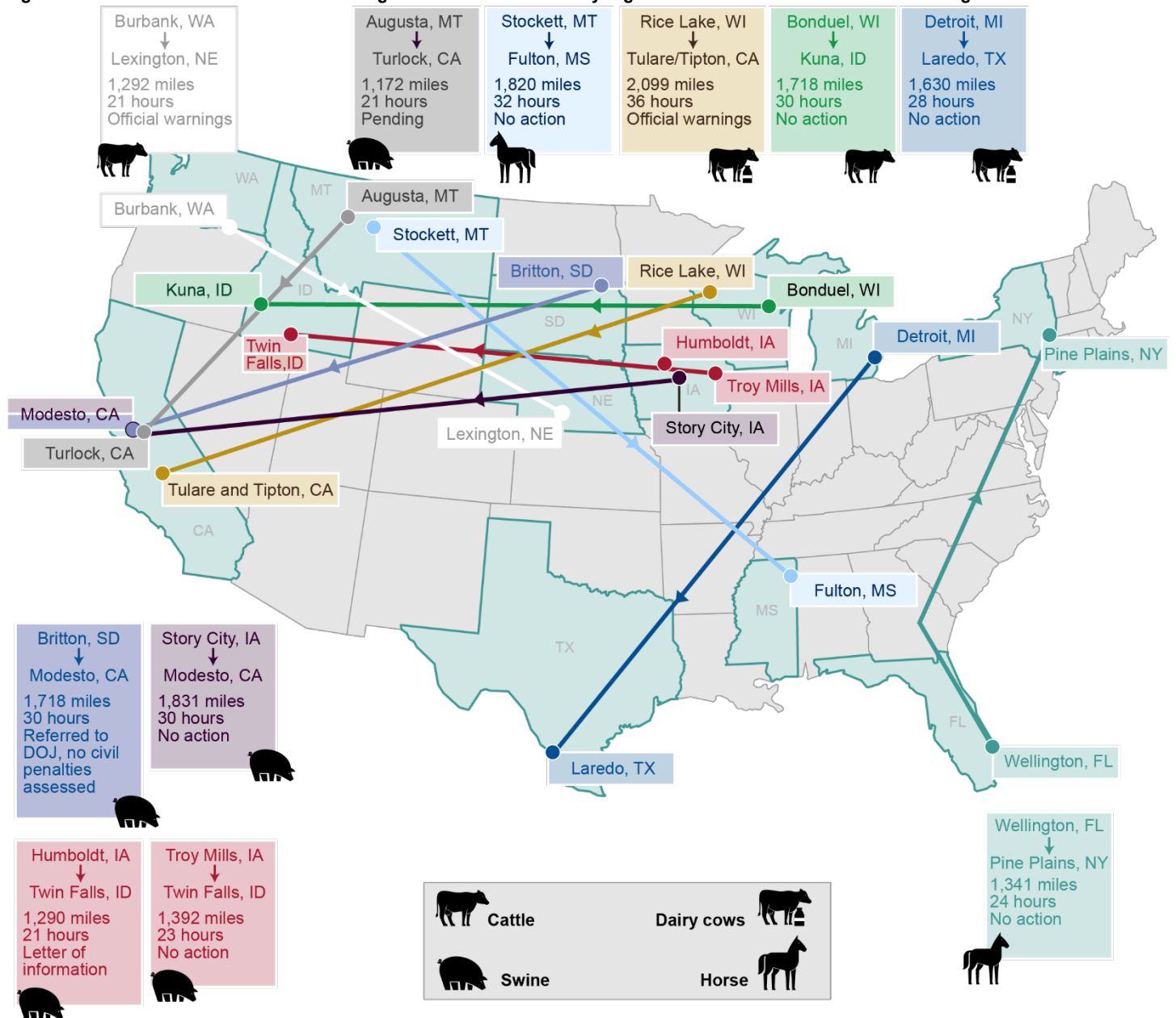
Note: Cases involved bison (2), beef and dairy cattle (9), swine (9), and horses (3).

^aAccording to USDA officials, after consulting with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), USDA's Office of the General Counsel determined that USDA should no longer issue official warning letters, which notify an alleged violator of an alleged violation and warn that USDA may seek civil or criminal penalties if the alleged violation continues.

^bA USDA letter of information was intended to educate alleged noncompliant entities about USDA's regulations and their obligation to comply with them.

We mapped 11 of the 23 cases to illustrate trips that had both a known origin and destination in the U.S. and exceeded 1,000 miles (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: Outcomes of Selected USDA Investigations of Potential Twenty-Eight Hour Law Violations from 2013 Through 2025



Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Case Management and Tracking System information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-26-108123

Accessible data for Figure 5: Outcomes of Selected USDA Investigations of Potential Twenty-Eight Hour Law Violations from 2013 Through 2025

Trip start	Trip finish	Approximate driving distance in miles	Driving time in hours	Species	Case Disposition
Bonduel, WI	Kuna, ID	1,718	30	Cattle	No action
Burbank, WA	Lexington, NE	1,292	21	Cattle	Official warnings
Rice Lake, WI	Tulare and Tipton, CA	2,099	36	Dairy Cows	Official warnings
Detroit, MI	Laredo, TX	1,630	28	Dairy Cows	No action
Wellington, FL	Pine Plains, NY	1,341	24	Horse	No action
Stockett, MT	Fulton, MS	1,820	32	Horse	No action
Britton, SD	Modesto, CA	1,718	30	Swine	Referred to DOJ, no civil penalties assessed
Story City, IA	Modesto, CA	1,831	30	Swine	No action

Humboldt, IA	Twin Falls, ID	1,290	21	Swine	Letter of information
Troy Mills, IA	Twin Falls, ID	1,392	23	Swine	No action
Augusta, MT	Turlock, C A	1,172	21	Swine	Pending

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture's Case Management and Tracking System information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-26-108123

Notes: The figure provides information about 11 of the 23 cases that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) investigated, including the origin and destination cities, the estimated distance and duration of transport, and the outcome of the investigation.

For these 11 cases, USDA identified both origin and destination cities within the U.S. We identified approximate latitude and longitude coordinates for each origin and destination and used the Network Analysis Toolkit in ArcGIS Pro v.3.3.2 to estimate drive time and distance using truck routes given speed limits and truck driving restrictions (see <https://pro.arcgis.com/en/pro-app/3.4/help/analysis/networks/network-analyst-solver-types.htm>). We estimated travel time by multiplying the expected travel time associated with the identified routes by the reported truck travel reliability index for all roads in the National Highway System as reported by the Federal Highway Administration's dashboard of national statistics on travel.

When applying this factor, we assumed all roads were within the National Highway System. These routes and estimated travel times do not account for stops of any kind (i.e., rest, refueling, vehicle safety or maintenance issues, or inspections of livestock animals) or other conditions, such as extreme weather, accidents, or road closures, or heavier than normal traffic conditions. As a result, actual driving times could be much longer.

Endnotes

¹Other U.S. laws cover various aspects of animal welfare or animal transport, but the Twenty-Eight Hour law is the only federal law that covers the transport of livestock. For example, the Animal Welfare Act, 7 U.S.C. §§ 2131-2159, which protects the welfare of certain animals, such as pets and research animals, does not cover livestock. In addition, the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1958, Pub. L. No. 85-765, 72 Stat. 862, as amended by Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1978, Pub. L. No. 95-445, 92 Stat. 1069 (codified at 7 U.S.C. §§ 1901, 1902, 1906), does not cover animal transport.

²The original 1873 law did not define the term "other animals." However, USDA policy and court opinions suggest the law's scope extended to animals considered to be livestock animals (e.g., horses). The reenacted 1994 law removed references to cattle, sheep, and swine, but retained the reference to "animals," without specifying which animals are covered. Neither Congress nor the courts have provided clarity on what other animals may be covered.

³For example, the law does not apply when animals are transported in a vehicle or vessel in which the animals have food, water, space, and an opportunity for rest. In addition, sheep may be confined for an additional 8 consecutive hours without being unloaded when the 28-hour period of confinement ends at night. Animals also may be confined for more than 28 hours when the animals cannot be unloaded because of accidental or unavoidable causes that could not have been anticipated or avoided when being careful. Finally, animals may be confined for 36 consecutive hours when the owner or person having custody of animals being transported requests, in writing and separate from a bill of lading or other rail form, that the 28-hour period be extended to 36 hours.

⁴We found no documentation or legislative history supporting how Congress identified the original time limit and exceptions.

⁵U.S. Department of Agriculture, Marketing and Regulatory Programs, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, *VS Guidance 13404.2, Import Transit Shipments of Live Animals*, December 2022. The Animal Health Protection Act focuses on preventing the spread of pests and diseases of livestock. The act allows the Secretary of Agriculture to prohibit or restrict the use of a vehicle in connection with an export or import of livestock that is not maintained in a clean and sanitary condition or does not have accommodations for the safe and proper movement of livestock. In the case of exports, the Secretary also can restrict or prohibit the use of a vehicle that does not have accommodations for the humane treatment of livestock. Pub. L. No. 107-171, tit. X, subtit. E, 116 Stat. 134, 494-509 (codified as amended at 7 U.S.C. §§ 8301-8317).

⁶According to this policy, this veterinary group, as a medical authority for the health and welfare of animals, supports research focused on improving transportation practices for animals.

Representatives of this veterinary group stated that in 2026 they will begin developing species-specific resources for the public, such as best practices or fact sheets.

⁷We did not analyze other laws to determine if they protect driver or vehicle safety.

⁸U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service: *FSIS Directive, Humane Handling and Slaughter of Livestock, 6900.2, Rev. 3* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2020). This directive informs USDA's inspection program personnel on the requirements, verification activities, and enforcement actions for ensuring the humane handling of livestock animals. In 2025, we reported that USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service conducts inspections at nearly 6,500 slaughter and meat processing facilities nationwide. See GAO, *Food Safety: USDA Should Take Additional Actions to Strengthen Oversight of Meat and Poultry*, [GAO-25-107613](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 22, 2025).

⁹To obtain an import permit, livestock carriers should identify rest stations along the planned route in case of emergencies or when the duration of transport is likely to reach or exceed the limits set in the Twenty-Eight Hour law.

¹⁰Senate Report 118-44, which accompanied the Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations Act, Consolidated, directed USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to provide a report on barriers to successfully implementing the Twenty-Eight Hour law. S. Rep. 118-44, at 53 (2023). In response, USDA sent a letter regarding the barriers to the House Committee on Appropriations on March 24, 2025. The report did not include recommendations to Congress.

¹¹The original 1873 law—passed before the introduction of cars and trucks—focused mainly on railroads, which were the primary means of transport for livestock animals. At that time, USDA officials were authorized to visually inspect shipments of livestock animals, such as cattle, from elevated platforms in stockyards. However, by the 1970s, trucks became the primary method for transporting livestock animals. In 2003, USDA acknowledged trucks as a conveyance regulated by the law. However, unlike railcars, trucks do not pass through common areas where USDA may more readily inspect the vehicle's contents when the agency has authority to do so. Moreover, according to USDA's 2025 letter to Congress, a lack of documentation required for domestic animal transport makes it difficult for the department to collect evidence and determine in a timely manner whether the Twenty-Eight Hour law has been violated.

¹²28 Fed. Reg. 5967 (June 13, 1963) (codified at 9 C.F.R., pt. 89). The rule established requirements for the types of pens and the amount and type of feed that specific types of livestock animals (dairy and beef cattle, goats, horses, mules, sheep, and swine) should receive at rest stations to comply with the Twenty-Eight Hour law.

¹³See 49 C.F.R. pt. 395.

¹⁴For example, a livestock hauler may drive a maximum of 11 hours in a 14-hour period after 10 consecutive hours off duty. 49 C.F.R. § 395.3(a)(3)(i). In addition, drivers must take a 30-minute break when they drive for a period of 8 hours without at least a 30-minute interruption. 49 C.F.R. § 395.3(a)(3)(ii). But see 49 C.F.R. § 395.1(k)(1), (4) (providing an exemption for livestock haulers during planting and harvesting periods when driving within 150 air-mile radius of the livestock's source or final destination).

¹⁵Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026, Pub. L. No. 119-75, div. D, tit. I, § 130, 140 Stat. 173; Full-Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025, Pub. L. No. 119-4, div. A, tit. I, § 1101(a)(12); Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024, Pub. L. No. 118-42, div. G, tit. I, § 131, 138 Stat. 25, 326; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-328, div. L, tit. I, § 132, 136 Stat. 4459, 5119 (2022); Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-103, div. L, tit. I, § 132, 136 Stat. 49, 707; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. L., tit. I, § 132, 134 Stat. 1182, 1844-45 (2020); Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-94, div. H., tit. I, § 131, 133 Stat. 2534, 2954-55 (2019); Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019, Pub. L. No. 116-6, div. G, tit. I, § 131, 133 Stat. 13, 413; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-141, div. L, tit. I, § 132, 132 Stat. 348, 991.

¹⁶Specifically, we reviewed studies, articles, and reports published since 2015 that were related to preventing animal cruelty during transport, using search terms such as “animal transport” and “livestock industry.” We reviewed 26 relevant documents to identify factors that could lead to animal cruelty during transport and compared those factors to the results of our analysis for corroboration purposes.

¹⁷The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Directorate, *Protection of Livestock During Transport*, LL File No. 2026-024711 (Jan. 2026). See <https://www.loc.gov/item/2026291250/>. The report provided information for Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, England, the European Union,

Israel, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and Switzerland. This information included the number of consecutive hours livestock may remain confined for transport; other limits on transport (e.g., requirements for the means of transport); treatment of livestock during transport; implementation and enforcement of the rules; and relevant court cases, where available.

¹⁸We included Australia, Canada, Mexico, and the European Union because they (1) are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or participants in the organization's work and (2) comprise geographic land areas of at least 1 million square kilometers. According to the U.S. mission to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, it is a multilateral organization of member countries working together to promote economic growth, prosperity, and sustainable development. The organization provides a forum to, for example, share best practices and advice on public policies.

¹⁹World Organization for Animal Health, *Terrestrial Animal Health Code, Ch. 7.3, Transport of Animals by Land* (2024). The United States is a voting member of this international organization, and a USDA official serves as the U.S. representative. According to agency officials, USDA has not supported the inclusion of animal welfare provisions in international trade negotiations because USDA does not have the legislative authority to mandate the way animals are raised for human consumption.