

## Safety Considerations for Cattle

Our topics for this week are:

- Handling facilities for cattle
- Handling methods adverse to good care and safety of cattle

Corporate livestock production, with multi-tiered management, increases the chances that animal handlers may not have sufficient experience and training to handle cattle well or that they have become desensitized to procedures that are abusive. Critical point criteria to assess the welfare of cattle has been advocated by Temple Grandin. These include how many cattle are limping, the percentage of cattle that vocalize during handling (no more than 3/100 head), running into gates or fences (1/100 or less), and percentage that fall down (no more than 1/100 head). Acts of abuse include dragging a live cow with a chain, running cattle on top of each other on purpose, prodding cattle in sensitive parts of their body, slamming gates on cattle on purpose, and beating a cow. Plants that supply McDonalds, Wendy's, and Burger King food chains must be audited for compliance with the critical care criteria. Family owned cattle and pig farms are not audited although cattle abuse can also occur on some of them.

### Handling Facilities Risks to Cattle

Cattle handling facilities can have physical hazards to cattle or be a psychological barrier that prevents them from moving in the facilities in ways that prevent them from injuring themselves or each other. Facilities should be reviewed for hazard potentials before working cattle. Handlers should drive in protruding nails, saw off bolts that are too long, replace rotten lumber, lubricate gates, and pad clanging steel parts. Floors should be uncluttered, sloping to provide drainage, and roughened to provide traction. The floor of forcing pens and alleyways should be concrete. Fences and gates must be strong enough to hold crowded, pushing cattle. Chutes and alleyways should be solid-walled and wide enough for cattle to move forward easily without being able to turn around.

Handlers should check out distractions in the work area, such as, clutter, water puddles, shadows, dangling chains, people in flight zones, and hissing and loud noises. Blood on the ground or floor can cause cattle to balk. Gates should be padded with rubber stops to reduce noise. The yard design should have cattle moving away from the yard entrance in holding pens but going toward the entrance in forcing pens and alleyways. Cattle desire to find escape in the direction they enter. Movement should be on the level or uphill. Good drainage is important to reduce cattle distracting pools of water. The bottom half of steel pens should be paneled to prevent legs from being caught. Yard pens should be long and narrow to aid one person moving cattle. Funnel shaped entrances into alleyways should be constructed from a crowding pen.

### Handling Methods Adverse to Cattle Care and Safety

Unfavorable handling of cattle results in decreased weight gains and performance, decreased immunity and resistance to disease, and bruising and injuries. Common handling procedures that cause stress include disbudding/dehorning, vaccinations, castration, weaning, pregnancy checks,

dipping, and drenching.

Yelling agitates cattle. Handlers should speak at a normal volume with a low tone of voice. Talking to an animal in a calm manner can reduce fear in animals and agitation in the handler. The handler should desensitize cattle to things that may be scary to them. Cattle should be worked in groups whenever possible. Individual animals worked alone are easily stressed and panicked. An escaped animal should never be chased. After herding it into an enclosure, a handler should allow 30 minutes for it to calm down before trying to draw it back to a familiar group.

Electric prods are painful and will panic cattle into injuring themselves or other cattle. Plastic paddles, flags, and streamers should be used rather than electric prods to move or turn cattle.

When moving cows with calves, handlers should begin slowly to allow the grazing cows to gather their calves. Cows will hide young calves and graze away from them, returning about every 4 hours to nurse. Rushing a gathering process will result in cows abandoning their calf. Situations that cause cattle to refuse to move (*balk*; British is *baulk*) can cause cattle to injure themselves as well as cause inefficiency in their handling. Common causes for balking are seeing commotion or hearing loud noises at the end of the alleyway, seeing a dead end in an alleyway, people being in the way of cattle movement, anything that flaps, strange smells, shadows and drains, and moving into sunlight. Anything that contrasts with the general appearance of ground or flooring will cause cattle to stop, put their head down, and try to focus on what appears unusual. Means to prevent balking includes having a chute with a headgate that faces a holding pen with resting cattle; using small pens and working small groups at a time; using the same flooring throughout forcing pen and alleyway; having a floor or ground that is level or a rising incline; providing a direction of movement into bright, but not blinding, sunlight; using curved alleyways with solid walls that allows cattle to view two body lengths ahead; padding steel working equipment; and reducing the width of the crowding pen.

Feeding and providing water to cattle in holding pens without working them will help to desensitize them to the fear of being confined and being around handling facilities. The handler should close the gate after they are in and let them stand for an hour. Then, he should let them out without handling them. Later, they should be released by opening up the crowding pen and alleyway, and letting them go through the squeeze chute and headgate without catching them. Familiarization to working facilities without stress will facilitate efficient movement, lower the stress, and improve the safety of handling cattle for needed procedures.

Commercial dairy cattle have been selectively bred for milk production without sufficient concern for some other genetic qualities. Their range of movement during a day has been confined, and they are often confined part of the day on concrete. These, and other factors, contribute to a higher susceptibility for lameness in dairy cattle in large scale operations than in beef cattle on pasture.

**Docking tails** is an amputation of up to 2/3 of tail length that is performed on some dairy cattle to reduce a soiled tail from contaminating milk, handlers, and equipment. Tails are also docked less commonly in feedlot cattle to prevent tails from being stepped on in close confinement. The adverse effects of tail docking in cattle can include inability to avoid biting insects and associated abnormal avoidance behaviors, stump infections, and neuromas. Although opposed by the National Milk Producers Federation, the National Mastitis Council, and the American Veterinary Medical Association, tail docking persists in many U.S. states. It is illegal

in at least 3 states and 5 European countries. McDonald's Corporation has announced that they will not purchase dairy products from groups that practice tail docking. The USDA has proposed a rule that would prohibit tail docking and require lameness monitoring in cattle that produce dairy products that can be labeled organic.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Distractions to cattle in handling facilities can cause balking, pile ups, and injuries.**
- 2. Cattle should be acclimated to handling facilities by being fed and watered and released before using the facilities for handling and restraint.**
- 3. Electric prods have no place in the handling of healthy cattle.**
- 4. Docking of dairy cow tails is opposed by the American Veterinary Medical Association and National Milk Producers Federation.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.