

Collecting and Sorting Cattle

Our topics for this week are:

- Collecting and handling tools for cattle
- Sorting and separation priorities

Collecting Cattle

Introducing cattle to a collecting facility prior to handling them for routine or medical procedures (“patterning” cattle in Australia) will reduce their stress when the time comes for them to be collected (“mustered” - British) for purposes other than training.

Collecting pens are best located between pastures, so that when changing pastures, the cattle have to walk through the collecting pens with a reward of fresh pasture on the other side. Gates should be located at the top of a rise, not the bottom. Entry to yards should be wide and along a fence line on level ground or uphill.

A collection pen must be strong enough to hold cattle in close confinement and not be constructed of wire fencing. After moving cattle into a collection pen, they should be allowed to settle for 20-30 minutes.

Cattle in small group confinement will bruise or injure each other during sorting, especially if not done quietly and efficiently. Cattle movement in the pen should be directed with flags. Handlers should not yell at or hit the cattle. When most of a group in a crowding pen are facing the alleyway, a handler should slowly swing the crowding gate to have them enter the alleyway one at a time. A drop down gate should be at the entrance of the squeeze chute which is raised to let one cow at a time into the chute. People should not be visible to the front or side of the squeeze chute. Careful use of a **tail twist hold** (released immediately with the slightest forward movement) can be used to train cattle to move forward when touched on the rump. Use of electric prods should be avoided.

The AVMA Policy on Livestock Handling Tools states: “*The AVMA believes that mechanical aids to direct livestock movement should be used sparingly and not to strike animals. Use of these aids should be secondary to good facility design and an understanding of the specific needs of the species involved. It is important that all people involved in livestock handling be trained in applicable animal behavior and handling techniques and be regularly monitored to ensure that appropriate practices are maintained. Electrical devices (e.g., stock prods) should be used judiciously and only in extreme circumstances when all other techniques have failed. Electrical devices should never be applied to sensitive parts of the animal such as the face, genitalia, or mucous membranes.*”

Electric prods, also called “hot shots” (“electric goad” in the United Kingdom), should be the last choice to encourage movement. Their use is frequently inhumane and counterproductive. However, in some situations if the cow does not get up or move, her life may be in danger such as getting downed cows up and into shelter before storms. Electric prods may be necessary to get a cow to move to save a handler’s life if the handler is knocked down in a pen or chute and are in danger of being stomped or crushed. Electric prods deliver 2,200 to 9,000 volts. Before using it, an electric prod should be discharged on something metal near the cow. The sound of the buzz

may be enough to cause movement, especially if they have been shocked before. After using it, the end should be touched to a metal surface to ground and discharge any residual electricity.

Sorting Cattle

Sorting may be for separating cattle by age, sex, state of health, and other reasons. Separating cattle from a larger group should be done in pairs, or more. Sorting a cow into a pen by itself can cause them to panic. In addition, a cow that is removed and isolated from a herd for 24 hours or more will be harassed when it rejoins the herd. Separated cattle should be returned as soon as possible. If separation is more than 24 hours, the member should be returned when the herd is actively engaged in something else, such as grazing in a new pasture or being fed grain. Returned cattle usually assume the same rank in the herd as the rank they left.

One method of sorting is to move them from collecting or holding pens into a sorting pen alleyway which is 12 to 14 ft wide and then they are separated into sorting pens. The handler should plan for the largest cattle to move down alleyway to last sorting pen. Sorting can be done more quietly with poles and small flags. It is best to sort out the least excitable first. For example, separate cows from bulls. Separate cows from calves. Separate older from younger cows. Alleyway sorting requires 2 handlers.

Sorting can also be done while moving cattle quietly out a pen by stepping in front of a cow's side balance point when wanting to turn one back into the pen. Movements should be slow, deliberate, and measured. The group to be sorted should be calmed for about 20 minutes. The handler should be visible, quiet, and present a small profile (turn to side, squat, sit) during the calming period, but he should never turn his back to animals near an exit.

If an exit from a pen is provided but cattle are reluctant to leave, a shirt or jacket can be tied to a rope and dragged slowly through the pen and out the gate. Often, the leaders of the group will follow it. If cattle rush through a gate, a handler can stand nearby inside the pen and move slightly toward the gate in front of the leader's side balance point, and as soon as the cattle slow down, the handler should step back. This back and forth movement may need to be repeated to regulate the speed of additional cattle movement through the gate.

A round pen or a modified Bud's Box with side pens to sort into can facilitate sorting cattle. A handler in the pen can encourage movement of the cattle along the edge of the pen, while a sorting handler opens the appropriate gate at the optimum time. The side pens should have gates that swing either into or out of the sorting pens to aid in sorting regardless of the direction they are moving around the round pen or Bud's Box. It is best to work small groups of cattle in a sorting pen so they can move more freely.

To facilitate moving cattle through a gate, gates in holding pens should be placed in a corner that is closest to water or feeding sites rather than the middle of a straight stretch of fence. Slick flooring of sorting alleyways should be treated with sand or crushed limestone. Sorting can also be performed horseback using trained cutting horses. Sorting with horses requires fewer facilities than sorting using special pens and handlers on foot.

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

- 1. Electric prods can have value in getting downed cows to stand, but they have no place in moving cattle.**
- 2. Cattle should always be sorted by moving the least excitable ones from the more excitable cattle.**

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

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.