

Containment for Ranch, Farm, and Stabled Animals

Our topics for this week are:

- Confinement and Behavior
- Containment and Stress
- Containment and Liability
- Response for Escaped Horses or Livestock

Good animal handling begins with safe and secure containment of the animal. Safety of the animal and of the handler depends on appropriate, well-maintained enclosures. It is true that “good fences make good neighbors” (from the 1914 poem *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost). However, otherwise excellent fencing contractors who do not have animal handling experience often build highly attractive, but unsafe, fencing for horses and livestock. It is essential to understand the strength and typical behavior of animal species to construct appropriate enclosures for them. Animal owners, animal handlers, and veterinary professionals should evaluate planned enclosures and inspect construction in progress to ensure enclosures are built for safety first of animals and handlers and esthetics second.

All domestic animals have basic needs that should be provided by good handlers, i.e., adequate and accessible food and water; room to stand and to raise their head, stretch, turn around, move forward, lie down, roll, and groom themselves without restriction; regular exercise; and social contact with people and other animals of their own species.

Containment (and handling) of farm animals that are used for federally funded research in the U.S. requires oversight by an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee that ensures compliance with the Public Health Service Policy and Animal Welfare Regulations. The welfare of farm animals in research is guided by the Federation of Animal Science Societies’ Guide for the Care and Use of Agricultural Animals in Research and Teaching.

Public knowledge of how livestock are contained and handled is the major motivation for finding improved methods for raising and handling livestock. The oversight of containment and handling for livestock for food production varies by state welfare laws and the extent of their enforcement. The most effective approach to achieving good animal handling for livestock depends on a team approach to problem solutions that includes consumers (the public), members of the food marketing chain, and the livestock producers. The best assessments for the quality of handling requires audits of animal health and behavior using objective criteria compiled and evaluated by trained auditors of normal animal behavior without conflicts of interest. Currently, these assessments are voluntary and those who do not value animal handling quality do not volunteer to undergo objective, independent opinion. The expectations of informed consumers are the driving force for improved livestock handling and containments.

CONFINEMENT AND BEHAVIOR

Confinement should not produce avoidable physical or mental injury to animals. Intentional and unintentional excesses in the degree of confinement of production animals and horses are among

the most common forms of animal abuse in the U.S. Some livestock producers who overly confine animals or provide little to no mental stimulation for them claim that this should be acceptable because the animals continue to breed, grow, or produce milk, eggs, or fiber. The ability to grow and be productive in some respects does not rule out physical or mental abuse.

There is a difference between conscience-based welfare and economic-based welfare, although they frequently, and should, overlap. The only way to assess whether animal confinement is acceptable to the average person's, i.e., conscience is to learn the normal behavior and physical being of animals in natural or near natural confinement, and for knowledgeable third parties without a financial conflict of interest to objectively compare and score the behavior and physical condition of the confined animals as long advocated by Temple Grandin.

Areas of confinement of domestic or wild animals should be large enough to permit normal movement, mental stimulation, frequent interaction with other living beings, and a zone of personal space. Confined animals should be monitored for abnormal aggression, self-mutilation, and stereotypic behaviors. Other factors than confinement can cause aggression, self-mutilation, or stereotypic behaviors in random animals, but additional room in the confinement should first be considered if these abnormal behaviors exceed the level considered to be of beyond random significance, which is 2% of the animals.

CONTAINMENT AND STRESS

Most stresses to domestic animals are caused by handlers. Stress can be physical or psychological. Containment should be safe from injury and provide protection from weather extremes to eliminate physical stresses. Animals can often adapt to continued physical stresses, but not to continued psychological stresses. Psychological stress can be the result of something fearful in an animal environment or from the lack of sufficient mental stimulation.

Stabling horses without turnout pens or time in pasture, keeping sows in gestation crates, and chickens in battery cages are all mentally sterile environments. The absence of adequate mental enrichments often to lead to weaving, pacing, self-mutilation, pawing, kicking, and cribbing in horses; bar biting, head weaving, and tongue rolling in sows; and feather picking in birds.

Stress is associated with greater transmission of disease, including salmonellosis. In addition to providing safety from injury and temperature extremes, good containment eliminates or minimizes exposure to fearful stimuli, such as harassment by predators or overcrowding and bullying by more dominant herd members. Good containment should also be as large as feasible with other enhancements to provide sufficient species-appropriate mental stimulation.

Raising herd animals in isolation can lead to psychological stress in the animals from a loss of psychological security that a group provides. Isolation causes an unrelenting need to be on alert for possible threats. However, very young or very old, pregnant, or sick animals may require segregation for safety or because of their frequent need for care by handlers.

CONTAINMENT AND LIABILITY

Containment Injury to Animals

Failure to provide or maintain adequate enclosures can subsequently cause injury to animals while they are contained. Sources of injury can include protruding nails, exposed metal edges,

weak boards, faulty wire attachments to fencing, and holes or gaps in flooring. Containments should always be examined for potential hazards prior to each use.

Animal Escape Consequences

How an animal may have escaped from containment should not be discussed until after a complete investigation. Possibilities, even if wrong, could invite allegations of negligence.

Animal Endangerment

Livestock, especially horses, are a danger to themselves when they escape. They can get hit by moving vehicles, attacked by dogs, fall in holes, become lost and starve, and be stolen, among other dangers.

The most useful means of identifying escaped horses that will assist their return is having good quality, recent photographs of the horse and closeups of its markings. In addition to photographs, stabled horses should have ID plates on their halter or dog tags with the owner's name and phone number. Lip tattoos can be useful for pastured horses that may escape. Inside the upper lip tattoos are used on race horses and recorded on their registration papers. Microchips and retinal identification are good identifiers that may aid in the return of escaped horses, but both require special equipment in detection and are best used in addition to halter tags or plates or tattoos, rather than in place of these easier identifiers.

Injury to Humans

Owners and handlers of animals are responsible for human injuries resulting directly or indirectly from escaped animals. For example, a handler can be liable for injuries to another person from an escaped bull that was in the handler's care. The other person's injuries can be crushing by the bull or breaking a leg by jumping a fence to escape the bull.

Prevention of Escape

Preventing escapes necessitates the double checking of gates and doors that should be closed. Stall doors should be double latched. Gate hinge pins should be oriented to prevent gates from being lifted off the hinge pins. Gates adjacent to public roads should be locked. Perimeter (secondary) fencing should be created around pastures, especially horse pastures, located near busy roads or highways. There should be a regular schedule of checking the condition of fences, ideally daily, and as soon as possible after thunderstorms and ice storms. Fence strength and height should be appropriate to the species, age, and condition of the animals enclosed and the size of the enclosed area.

Reasons for a desire to escape should be reduced or eliminated. Always provide adequate food and water, sufficient exercise and companionship, and prevent harassment (dogs, trespassers, herd bullies). New members to a herd should be introduced slowly and at times when the herd is distracted by a new food source to prevent bullying. When sorting out a member of a herd to provide treatment for an illness or injury at least one known preferred herdmate should be kept with the animal. Horses should be put in stalls before thunderstorms. Dogs should be prevented from chasing horses.

Response to Escaped Horses and Livestock

Escaped livestock or horses can be a life-threatening danger to themselves and to humans, but

despite the urgency needed to return them to confinement, excitement or disorganization in the efforts to contain them can worsen the situation. If the animal is off the handler's property, law enforcement should be contacted (call 911) for notification of potential personal or property damage that could be done by the loose animal. Neighbors should be contacted and requested that they contact the handler if they see a loose animal.

When possible, animal access to roads should be blocked, and a temporary enclosure created. Horses escape enclosures more often than other livestock. Primary reasons are fear, hunger, thirst, or sex drive. The response to a loose horse should include gathering a halter and lead rope, grain in a bucket, and a flashlight, if night is near. If the animal's location is not known, a spiraling circle should be walked looking for tracks. Wherever other horses are kept should be checked as well as where food or water might be found because a common cause for horses to try to escape enclosures is inadequate access to food or water. In some cases, enlisting the aid of a drone may be best means of locating an escaped horse.

When possible, the horse(s) should be lured into containment. Herd members do not like to be separated from the herd. If all the herd members have not escaped, the best lure is to tie other well-mannered horse(s), but not stallions, inside pastures or pens and open the gates to lure a loose horse or horses into the enclosure. Another means of using herd members as a lure is to lead another well-mannered horse (not stallions) as encouragement for a loose horse to follow. Grain in buckets may be used as a lure if only one horse is loose. Using food for a lure with multiple loose horses is too dangerous for the handler.

A handler of the loose horse should discourage anyone else, including law enforcement officers, from attempting to catch the animals to prevent likelihood of injuries to an inexperienced handler and stirring up the animal(s). These assistants can be helpful in positioning themselves between the animals and a roadway to try to prevent animals going into traffic endangering motorists. Assistants can block any further exits, as much as possible. Simple portable rope corrals created with poles and mesh fencing, construction netting, or one to three strains of ropes may assist in containing loose horses until an appropriate handler calms and catches individual horses. Several people are required to keep the corral line stretched out.

The approach to a loose horse must be done quietly with confidence, preferably by a handler known to the horse. The portable corral can be used to herd the horse into a fixed enclosure (pen or pasture) or slowly shrink to enclose the horse so that a handler can approach the horse without it fleeing. Like most fences, a portable corral is a psychological enclosure, not a physical enclosure. If frightened enough or aggressively approached, a horse will challenge the enclosure and try to either run through it or jump it. After a successful capture, the horse should be kept in relatively close confinement such as a stall until the excitement of their adventure has subsided.

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

- Consumers of livestock products should have a voice in how livestock is contained.
- If more than 2% of contained animals display signs of stress, injury, or stereotypic behaviors, there is a problem with the means of containment.
- Horse and livestock can escape from most containments if motivated by fear, lack of food or water, or by breeding season.

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.

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.