

Considerations on Containment for Livestock Production

Our topics for this week are:

- **Assessment of Livestock Containment Quality**
- **Effects of Containment on Behavior**
- **Stress to Livestock from Improper Containment**

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”. 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.

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 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.

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 not be injurious and should 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 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.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Most contractors are not aware of the proper containment needs of livestock, so animal owners need to learn to evaluate containment construction.**
- 2. Abnormal behavior of livestock is a reliable indicator of improper containment.**
- 3. Improper containment can lead to stress in livestock which, in turn, can suppress immunity to diseases.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.