



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section

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Cattle Psychology During Handling and Corral Design

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An understanding of cattle psychology, combined with well-designed facilities, will reduce stress on both you and your cattle. Calm cattle are easier to handle than excited cattle, and cattle are less likely to injure themselves or handlers. If cattle become excited, as much as 15 to 30 minutes are needed to calm them down.

Lowering stress is important because stress reduces the ability to fight disease and reduces weight gain. It also increases shrink, damages rumen function, and can interfere with reproduction. Cattle that become excited and agitated when handled have lower weight gains and are more likely to have meat quality problems. Quiet handling will also make it easier to administer injections because calm animals move less in the squeeze chute.

Cattle have long memories. An animal's previous experiences will affect its stress reaction to handling. Animals that have been handled roughly will be more stressed and difficult to handle in the future. Animals that are handled gently and have become used to handling routines will experience little stress when handled.

According to an old saying, "You can tell what kind of a stockman a person is by looking at the behavior of his cattle." In one feedlot survey, cattle from a yard that had a reputation for rough handling were wild and difficult to manage at the packinghouse. They also had more bruises and more carcasses classified as dark cutters.

It is advisable to get cattle accustomed to handling by people on foot, horseback, and in vehicles. Cattle that have never been moved by people on foot on the ranch, may cause handling problems at feedlots and packing plants when people attempt to move them. When cattle are introduced to a new corral or a new handling procedure such as being moved by a person on foot, their first experience should be positive. First experiences make a big impression on animals. The person should walk quietly among them. Since breeding cows will be

using the same facilities repeatedly, it is recommended that any new corral be introduced by letting the cows walk through it before actual work is done.

Although painful procedures cannot be avoided, decreasing agitation and excitement will reduce stress. Cattle remember painful restraint methods such as nose tongs. Subsequent handling will be easier if you use a halter to hold their heads and keep electric prod usage to an absolute minimum.

Behavior Principles

Cattle have wide-angle vision and can see behind themselves without turning their heads. However, they have a small blind spot to the rear (Fig. 1).

Understanding the flight zone – the cow's safety zone – is the key to easy, quiet handling. When you penetrate the flight zone, the animals will move away, and when you retreat from the flight zone they will stop. The size of the flight zone is determined by several factors, such as wildness or tameness of the animal and the angle of the handler's approach.

The flight zone will be larger when the handler approaches head-on, and it will become smaller when the animal is confined to a single-file chute. A cow passing you will have a smaller flight zone. If a cow becomes excited, the flight zone will increase.

Cattle can be easily moved by working on the edge of the flight zone (Fig. 1). The handler must be close enough to the animal to make it move, but not so close as to cause it to panic and flee. If the cattle start moving too fast, you must back out of the flight zone.

If cows on pasture turn and look at you, you need to approach them and put pressure on the edge of the flight zone to restart movement. To keep the animals moving, alternately enter and retreat from the flight zone. This is the principle of pressure and release. Reward an animal