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PRESS RELEASE

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NATURALLY SAFE

Cattle's natural instincts could be an asset during handling, if you know how to use them.

Understanding cattle behavior and having a clear plan for processing them can make handling the animals less stressful, improving safety for both the animals and the handlers.

Rob Eirich, Extension Educator
Director of Beef Quality Assurance,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, says developing a processing plan and providing that information to everyone involved in the processing is a good first step in safely handling cattle.

“As you gather the livestock, it’s helpful to understand the natural instincts of cattle,” Eirich says. “They’re herd animals and they’re probably going to be highly agitated and stressed if they’re separated from the rest of the herd. Isolated cattle can become frantic, posing a serious threat to handler safety.”

Allowing isolated cattle to maintain visual contact with other animals will reduce their anxiety. Calm animals can help excited ones quiet down.

Cattle herds have a leader and allowing the herd to follow the leader without pushing them too hard also reduces the animals' stress. When animals bunch up, it's more effective to concentrate on moving leaders rather than pushing the cattle from the rear. Use of these techniques can reduce stress related to shipping fever and carcass damage caused by bruising.

"It's important to move cattle at a pace they're comfortable with," Eirich says. "If you push them too hard, it can trigger them into rapid flight or to turn and fight. They're more likely to go where you're trying to take them if the pace of the move matches their natural pace."

An animal's flight zone or personal space is key to successfully and safely moving cattle. If a person or object enters the flight zone, the animal instinctively moves away.

"Cattle that only see handlers a few times each year have a much larger flight zone than show cattle that are used to being right up against people on a daily basis," Eirich says. "The flight zone is also impacted by the animals' familiarity with both their surroundings and the people involved in handling them."

To judge an animal's flight zone, handlers can slowly walk up the animal. If the flight zone is penetrated too deeply, the animal will either run away or turn toward the handler and run past them. Once the handler retreats from the flight zone, the animal is likely to stop moving.

"The best place to work is on the edge of the flight zone," Eirich says. "It's not uncommon for cattle to rear up and become highly agitated when they're in a single file chute. That can be triggered by a

person who leans over the chute or otherwise penetrates that animal's flight zone."

Cattle are prey animals and instinctively tend to face whatever they perceive as a threat. Cattle also often bunch together when threatened. Moving cattle at a slow walk is the least stressful pace for them. Handler movements should be at a slow walk, too.

Proper design, construction and maintenance of handling facilities are key to safely processing cattle. A curved working system or properly designed loading box with double alleys is most efficient.

Basic design elements include diagonal pens that provide adequate room for the number of cattle held there, typically up to 20 square feet for cows over 1200 pounds.

"Before you process animals, check all the gates and alleyways to make sure every part of the facility is in good working condition," Eirich says. "Just because it worked well the last time doesn't mean it won't require some maintenance before you use it now."

Use of a single file chute or working alley outside a facility building can help avoid balky cattle that are unwilling to enter the building. Because this is a point where animals can become agitated, it's key to ensure all aspects of the chute are in good working condition.

"Check all latches, ropes and cables on the chute," Eirich says. "You don't want them to break while you're processing an animal. Squeeze chutes pose a risk of injury to animals and handler arms, hands and fingers. Those injuries are much more likely to happen if all the chute elements aren't in good working condition."

Eirich advises handlers to consider the appropriate clothing for the processing work. Depending on weather conditions and the condition of the processing site, clothing needs may vary from one processing event to another.

“Gloves are a key part of safety for this work,” Eirich says. “If horses are involved, make sure riders are wearing proper footwear and not big, bulky boots which could get hung up in a stirrup. Think through the handling process and be aware of things that could happen and result in injury.”

Round crowding pens and the use of two or more sorting pens in front of the squeeze chute enhances handler safety. Crowding pens should never be more than three-quarters full, so cattle can turn around.

Cattle will react to many types of distractions around a chute, including hanging chains, shadows, backstops, and noises. Dogs and people should be well away from the chute. To reduce balking, the sides of the squeeze chute should be covered, especially the back three-fourths of the chute.

Cattle tend to move from dark areas to lighter areas, as long as the light isn't glaring. A spot light shining onto a ramp or other apparatus often facilitates entry. Painting handling facilities all one color will help avoid having cattle balk at a sudden color change.

Use of cattle prods – electric or otherwise – should be minimized. Waving sticks with plastic streamers on the end is safer and less stressful to the cattle. It also reduces the chance of bruising the animals.

All handlers should have a thorough understanding of the type of processing being done. Whether the activity involves artificial insemination (AI) or administering vaccinations, all handlers should understand the safety practices related to the products used.

“Product storage safety begins when the products are purchased,” Eirich says. “Pay close attention to proper temperature ranges and plan for appropriate product handling at the processing site.”

Handlers should be well acquainted with proper handling of all sharp tools such as syringes, needles or scalpels. Care should be taken to avoid accidental injection of the handler when giving shots.

“Some injectable products are more dangerous than others,” Eirich says. “Young females should be advised about handling synchronizing agents. If they do administer these products, they should wear rubber gloves so none of the product is absorbed through their skin.”

Antibiotics intended for animal use can pose serious health issues if they are injected into a person. Include a plan to handle a potential injury before it occurs.

“When an emergency occurs, it’s easy to lose focus,” Eirich says. “If someone fractures ribs, or breaks a foot, the adrenaline gets going and we sometimes forget our surroundings.”

“In addition to making processing safer, all these practices will reduce animal stress, injury, and sickness,” Eirich says. “At the same time, working in this manner lowers the risk of handler injury and increases overall processing efficiency.”