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CATTLE BEHAVIOR: ITS KEY TO SAFE HANDLING

Using the instinctive behaviors of cattle to move and manage them makes handling activities much safer for both handlers and animals.

Retired Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) animal science professor, Jo Bek, says building a relationship with the cattle you manage is an important step in the process.

“Every time we come in contact with an animal, we make an impression, either good or bad,” Bek says. “Even in a feedyard, cattle are around for a while. Since they are prey animals, you want them to look at you as a leader not as a threat.”

Bek’s experience with handling cattle goes back several generations, to a time when her grandfather and his brothers managed other ranchers’ cattle.

“My grandfather was actively cowboying when he passed away at the age of 78,” Bek says.

In her teaching career, Bek emphasized again and again that the idea of getting behind cattle to move them means they are motivated by the fear of someone/something that they can’t clearly see.

“Coming from a place of fear never brings good results with cattle,” she says. “It makes livestock more unpredictable and focused on protecting themselves. While you move them, make sure you can see their eyes. That means they can see you, too, and they’ll be much more relaxed.”

Stressed cattle become agitated and excited, causing elevated body temperature, increased heart rate and reduced immune function. Agitated cattle are more likely to damage facilities and injure themselves or handlers. In addition to being safer, low-stress handling practices are more profitable.

“A fear response in cattle release stress hormones that make their heart beat faster, initiating the flight or fight response,” Bek says. “If they can’t get away, they may try to fight.”

While a quiet, calm demeanor makes cattle handling easier, it’s also important to train cattle to respond to pressure intended to move them. Otherwise, an animal that becomes a “pet” may ignore a request to make a change because they lose their drive.

“You want to pressure them to move, then remove that pressure when they respond,” Bek says. “If you don’t back off, you will be perceived as a threat. Predators don’t release pressure, they keep coming, and the cattle’s instinct is to flee.”

WALK OR RIDE IN ZIGZAG MANNER

To effectively move cattle down an alleyway, walk or ride in a zigzag manner behind them, going back and forth. Be sure you can see the curve of their eye because that means they can see you and will keep moving forward. The zigzag movement allows them to see handlers and recognize that pressure is being applied and released as they respond. Working directly behind them in an alleyway and not moving in a zigzag fashion, puts handlers in the cattles’ blind spot, instigating a fear response.

“If you want them to go forward, work right off the back of their shoulder,” Bek says. “Walk slowly and they will walk slowly. Handling them in this manner helps prevent them from blowing back in the alleyway.”

Over time, cattle handled with low stress practices generally learn what’s expected of them and generally move more easily.

“When you move cattle to a new area, if they buck and run once they get there, that’s the sign of healthy animals,” Bek says.

Ability to read cattle body language allows handlers to understand postures or threats from an animal that isn’t responding to handling. Healthy cows, calves and bulls generally stretch after getting to their feet, then relax to a normal position. If don’t stretch don’t feel good. If they

stand with an arched back, with head and ears lowered, it can be a sign of discomfort or discontent. Cattle response to intense pressure may include bellowing, butting or kicking.

The tail can give quick clues to an animal's mood and condition. When hanging straight down, the tail indicates a relaxed manner. If the tail is tucked between the animal's legs, it indicates that the animal is cold, sick or frightened. During threat or investigation, the tail hangs away from the body. If the animal is running, the tail is held straight out.

In some instances, an animal with an aggressive disposition may not learn to respond to low stress handling.

"At NCTA, we had a heifer that was wild from day one," Bek says. "We considered replacing her and not putting her in our feedyard. In the end, we kept her."

At the end of the feeding period, documentation revealed that the heifer had only gained a total of 100 pounds. Her unruly behavior and combative disposition had greatly affected her performance.

"There are other research projects that demonstrate the low performance of aggressive or contentious cattle," Bek says. "If you have a cow that damages facilities, knocks you down or breaks a limb, you won't realize much profit from her. One rule of thumb some producers use is that, if an aggressive momma hasn't settled down by the time the calf is three days old, she needs to go."

Skilled pen riders can be quick to pick up unusual behavior from feeder cattle. Because predators seek out sick or injured animals, prey like cattle are adept at hiding any sign of sickness to avoid being attacked.

"My dad could look across our entire cattle herd and pick out a cow that wasn't acting quite right," Bek says. "My brother and I didn't have that same skill and we never figured out how Dad could see it. But anytime he told us to check on an animal, we found there was some issue. I believe some of that is a God-given talent."

For producers who aren't familiar with cattle behavior and how to read their actions, Bek recommends watching someone who has these kinds of skills or bringing in a consultant who can provide training.

Bek also notes that beef producers don't need special handling facilities. Once cows feel at ease and producers know how to communicate where and how they want the herd to move, handling becomes much more routine.

“Know where to apply pressure and recognize what cattle perceive as predator behavior,” Bek says. “It’s surprising how quickly cattle can learn to respond to what you’re asking them to do once they don’t feel threatened.”

Additional resources regarding handling beef cattle can be found at <https://beef.unl.edu>.

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