

Reduce Stress on Cattle

Chronic stress can have negative effects on the health, productivity and welfare of farm animals. Acute stress at milking can inhibit oxytocin secretion which becomes apparent as reduced milk yield resulting from increased residual milk. Cattle are susceptible to a variety of psychological stressors which must be understood if we are to reduce the level of stress they experience.

Rough or aversive handling leads cattle to become frightened of people and to be stressed in their presence. Improving handling and animal care requires that we understand more about how cattle react to people, the types of handling they find aversive and the reasons that animal handlers use rough handling.

Given the importance of good stockmanship in improving animal welfare, what are the most effective ways to reduce our cattle's fear of people? Here are a few recommendations:

- ✓ **Increase contact with people.** Cattle can be fearful of humans if they do not have sufficient exposure to people when young. Although this is generally more of a problem in beef production than in dairy production, the development of large scale dairy farms has resulted in less contact between people and replacement stock. Increased gentle handling of younger cattle has been shown repeatedly to reduce the fearfulness of cattle towards people.
- ✓ **Identify which types of handling are aversive.** Since the type of handling used by the stockperson affects the fearfulness of the animals, a necessary first step in improving the relationship between animals and the stockperson is to identify the particular behaviors that cattle find aversive. Examples of rough handling practices that increase fearfulness and restlessness in cattle include shouting, slapping, punching, hitting with the hand or stick, tail twisting and use of an electric prod.
- ✓ **Prevent 'learned fear' of the stockperson.** At times, even the best stockperson will have to handle animals in an aversive way. Often this is done for the animal's own welfare, such as when

giving injections or treating illness. However, one risk is that the animal will become frightened of that person. It may be possible to mask the identity of the individual in fairly simple ways. There is now clear evidence that cattle can tell different people apart—they have a reasonable degree of visual acuity and are capable of colour vision. Visual cues, especially those associated with clothing seem to be particularly important. Studies have shown that, under some circumstances, a loss of recognition can occur following simple changes in appearance, such as a change of clothes. It may be possible to take advantage of this association by wearing special coloured clothing when essential but aversive treatments are necessary. Although it may be possible to hide a person's identity under some circumstances, we should not underestimate the ability of cows to use quite subtle features to recognize individuals.

- ✓ **Alter stockpersons' attitudes.** The way people handle animals is likely to be a reflection of long held beliefs and attitudes towards animals; thus recommendations alone may not be sufficient to change their behaviour. Showing the negative effects of poor handling on the fearfulness and productivity of cattle, along with examples of good and poor handling techniques may be an effective means of changing the way people interact with livestock.
- ✓ **Determine why people mishandle animals.** In addition to attitudes and general opinions on animals, situations can have a marked influence on the way animals are handled. Consequently, to improve the ways animals are handled, it helps to know what circumstances lead to animals being handled roughly. Conditions that can lead to adverse and overly-aggressive handling include frustration and impatience, difficulty in moving cattle, time pressures, equipment malfunctions, low job satisfaction, and family and home problems. If specific issues are identified, herd owners and managers can take steps to improve facilities and job situations which can lead to improvement in job satisfaction and performance.

source: NMC Udder Topics, February 2005