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Working Cattle With Safety in Mind

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Farmers are aware of the dangers of working with machinery, the leading cause of injuries and deaths in the nation's most hazardous occupation. A summary from 15 states of farm accidents revealed that animals were a factor in one out of every eight injuries, ranking second to machinery in total cases. A study from the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 1992-1997 revealed that 75,000 workers incurred injuries, and 375 workers were fatalities from animal-related injuries. Cattle were responsible for most of the injuries caused by animals. A 1997 study conducted by Oklahoma State University's Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering Department found 150 cases of cattle handling-related injuries from 100 Oklahoma cow-calf operations. The study showed that more than one-half of the injuries resulted from human error, while facilities accounted for almost 25 percent of the total.

Human error can cause many accidents. Errors in judgement and action can occur due to numerous reasons, but happen most frequently when people are tired, hurried, careless, upset or do not understand animal behavior.

There are many reasons cattle react the way they do when trying to get them up at working time. Many of these reactions are a result of their innate characteristics. Understanding these characteristics and how animals respond to different situations can make cattle handling a safe and less stressful event. Decreasing stress and excitability in both the cattle and cattle handler will improve the safety of both when getting cattle up. Many accidents are a result of handlers not understanding animal behavior and wanting to get the job done in a hurry.

Vision

Cattle have panoramic vision in excess of 300 degrees, which means they can see in all directions except for directly behind themselves. In contrast, human's vision is roughly 180 degrees. Approaching cattle from directly behind can startle them and be dangerous to the handler.

Cattle also have poor depth perception. Their ability to perceive ground depth while moving is very limited. Because of this, they

have to stop and lower their heads to focus. Thus, unfamiliar objects and shadows on the ground can cause them to balk when entering or moving through the chute. Due to the limitation in vertical vision and lack of ability to focus, a shadow on the ground can appear to be a large ditch.

Cattle are sensitive to light differently than humans and move more freely from a dimly illuminated area to a more lighted area provided the light is not glaring in their eyes. As a result, getting them to move into a dark chute from a sunny outdoor crowding pen can be difficult. If working cattle at night, frosted lamps need to be used in order to eliminate glare in the cattles' eyes.

Hearing

Cattle hear differently than humans. They can hear both lower volume and higher frequency sounds better than humans but cannot pinpoint the source as well as humans. Loud sounds scare them very easily. Because of their poor depth perception, excessive screaming and hollering can agitate them and cause them to move away from the source of noise and crash into fences or other objects, including people. Be extremely cautious of cattle with sight problems (such as cancer eye) as they rely on hearing to a greater extent and may overreact to sounds.

Flight Zone or Distance

Like people, cattle have a comfort zone. Their flight zone is measured by how near you can approach them before they move. When you enter an animal's flight zone, they will start to move; when approaching cattle from the front they will turn and move away from you. If approaching them from the rear, they will turn to look at you and move forward. The speed at which they move will vary depending upon their temperament. Wild cattle or those that have had bad experiences with cattle handling will have larger flight zones than docile cattle and will not allow a person to get near them before moving. Calmer cattle will allow a person to get closer to them before they start moving.

Familiarity also affects the size of the flight zone. The cattle are more apprehensive with unfamiliar people or those who, in the past, handled them incorrectly.

Herd Instinct

Cattle are prey animals and feel comfortable and safe in a group. This instinct causes them to want to be in a group and follow other animals' movement in that group. Being alone may cause them heightened anxiety, fearfulness and willingness to fight back in a situation that a human might not perceive as dangerous. When an individual cow is separated from the herd it can become very stressed, agitated and aggressive. When trying to separate an individual from a herd, it is often much easier to allow one or two additional animals to go with that animal.

Maternal Instinct

Cows have a defensive instinct to protect their young from danger. A cow or heifer's behavior can become very unpredictable at or after calving. A docile animal can become aggressive and charge when being separated from their young. A cow is often aggressive just after calving and is not to be trusted. Usually the younger the calf, the more dangerous the mother. Always keep the calf and some barrier between yourself and its mother when ear tagging or performing any other practice for newborn calves.

Territorial

Animals are attached to their own territory and are comfortable in that area. Changing environments or location alters their comfort level and can lead to changes in

temperament. They may become very tentative when exposed to strange surroundings. Also, in a new environment they sometimes try to re-establish a new pecking order. A single animal moved to a foreign environment may become overly agitated and aggressive. It is best to provide that single animal with a companion animal to overcome stress and excitement.

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