

Starting Calves Off Right – Spring Processing Fun or Frustrating?

It is spring and that means processing time for spring calving cow herds in Eastern Nebraska. Will it be a fun experience or frustrating? Will it be easy, rewarding and fun or will there be yelling, cussing, and short tempers? How we work our cattle goes a long way in determining if it is a fun or frustrating experience.

Numerous scientific studies have illustrated that several animal performance values are positively correlated with good handling practices and negatively with coercive handling practices. Wild cattle are often discounted several cents a pound, because buyers know that sickness rates will go up and performance will be down. Flighty behavior is partly genetic and partly due to the way cattle have been handled. Gentle handling can make flighty cattle less wild, and poor handling can make gentle cattle become wild and dangerous.

Low stress livestock handling has gained increased acceptance in the livestock industry. It really is a return to sound effective stockmanship. The animal industries cannot afford to allow any form of abusive behavior or handling of livestock on the farm, in the feedyard or at the packing plant.

There are five basic principles of cattle behavior that when used properly can improve the ease and speed of working cattle while reducing stress and increasing efficiency. Those principles are: 1. Cattle want to see you. 2. Cattle want to go around you. 3. Cattle want to be with or go to other cattle. 4. Cattle want to return to where they have been. 5. Cattle can only process one main thought at a time.

There are three basic means of communicating with livestock. Very simply they are: Sight, Sound and Touch. Cattle prefer to communicate through the line of sight.

Curt Pate, stockmanship trainer, Ron Gill and Rick Machen, Texas A&M Extension Livestock Specialists, have developed a list of ten handling pointers to keep in mind that will ease the handling of cattle, whether they are being gathered from the pasture or processed through the corrals or a chute.

1. The only way to work cattle quickly is slowly.
2. Work from the front to draw cattle to you.
3. Apply pressure when cattle have a place to go.
4. Apply pressure from the side.
5. Cattle must be comfortable to go by you and stay straight.
6. Pressure cattle from behind only when absolutely necessary.
7. When working cattle, move in triangles and straight lines.
8. Going with the flow of cattle slows them down or stops their movement.
9. Going against the flow of cattle initiates or accelerates their movement.
10. Cattle work best when they are ready; you have to get them ready.

To read more about these low stress livestock handling concepts do an Internet search for “Cattle Handling Pointers Gill Pate Machen.”

Have you tried adding a “Bud Box” to your working facilities? The “Bud Box” comes from Bud Williams, best known for his methods for teaching low stress livestock handling through stockmanship schools. The “Bud Box” uses cattle’s natural instincts and the five basic principles of cattle behavior. There is nothing magical about a “Bud Box” or Return Box. It is a facility design that allows you the handler to position yourself correctly to facilitate cattle flow out of the box into either the crowd alley leading to a chute or to a trailer load out. The simplicity of the box is that it makes you, as a stockman, do things correctly. If you do not, cattle will not work any better out of a box than they will a tub. When handled correctly, they will work better out of a box than they will a tub system. Bud boxes can be constructed using panels or they can be permanent. For details on designing and using a Bud Box do an Internet search for Designing a Bud Box.

Numerous others will handle your cattle after they have left your care. Bad habits and unruly behavior in cattle and humans is learned. When working correctly shouting, whistling, poking and prodding cattle is unnecessary and counterproductive. Development of effective stockmanship skills and the use of Beef Quality Assurance practices is about improving worker safety, animal health and performance and increasing the income of each individual operation.

Sources:

Cattle Handling Pointers – R. Gill and R. Machen, Texas A&M Extension

Calf Branding/Processing Time and Beef Quality Assurance – Rob Eirch, Nebraska Extension

The Case for Low Stress Livestock Handling – Whit Hibbard

Additional resources:

- UNL Beef website: beef.unl.edu
- UNL BeefWatch (monthly e-newsletter that you can subscribe to):
<http://newsroom.unl.edu/announce/beef>
- UNL BeefWatch Podcasts (these are more intimate chats with some of the authors of the BeefWatch articles, you can also subscribe or download them):
<http://beef.unl.edu/beefwatch-podcast>

Steve

Steve Tonn, Nebraska Extension Educator – Beef Systems

Washington County Extension

597 Grant Street Ste 200

Blair, NE 68008-2550

402-426-9455

stonn2@unl.edu