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DAIRY STOCKMANSHIP

There are a few general concepts about cow behavior stock handlers should keep in mind. Livestock derive information from the environment through their five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Cows do not use language to communicate with people so stock handlers must communicate with cows by stimulating the senses of the animal. The two most important senses a cow uses to understand what is going on in her environment are sight and hearing.

Cows consistently look at what is pressuring them. Because the eyes and ears of the cow are positioned on the side of the skull, cows have excellent peripheral vision and hearing.. There is a narrow blind spot directly behind her rump. A good general rule is that if the handler can see the cow's eye ball she can probably see the handler. Therefore , the human should approach the animal from a position where her eyeball can be seen, in this manner she can probably see and hear the handler. Surprising livestock is never a good idea, so let them see the handler if possible and if not, let them gently hear who approaches them.

Cows tend to move in an arc around whatever they perceive as stimulus. This allows them to keep an eye on what is pressuring them as they move around or away from it. Cows tend to follow other cows. These two concepts are invaluable when empting a cattle pen or loading a transport with cattle. If the handler can create a positive motion at the front of the herd and then avoid doing anything to slow or stop the flow, cows will tend to move in the direction they are facing while following the cow in front of them. If, for example, handlers are moving animals into the parlor, the task will be accomplished more efficiently if the handler induces the animals to face the opening into the parlor. If the handler causes the animals to turn back toward the crowd gate, flow stops and the cattle tend to bunch. Handlers need to pay close attention to their position in relationship to the direction of cow movement. It is most important not to over-stimulate or to apply stimulus in an unpredictable manner to the animal. Extreme examples of over-stimulation are shouting, arm waving, and hitting animals or using electric prods to get them to move. Cows do not respond positively when over-stimulated, they exhibit agitation and may run potentially leading to harm. These examples of too much stimulus can be called high stress cow handling techniques.

To summarize the key stockmanship concepts faculty at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine have developed a list of specific stockmanship engagement rules. These general rules are the foundation for teaching diary stockmanship to people interacting with cattle. Producers that understand the rules will find many opportunities to lower the handling stress when working with their cattle. This concept can be applied to dairy stockmanship training programs and determine when, where and how stimulus can be used. Good stock-people have learned to follow these rules without consciously thinking about them. Stated another way, good stock-people have learned to very closely observe the behavior responses of the cows (Donald Hoglund).

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IMPROVING COW COMFORT

The design and management of each animal shelter component (feeding, resting, drinking, floor surface, ventilation) can influence the willingness and ability for dairy cows to consume an adequate amount of dry matter. The design of the feeding area should provide a comfortable feeding experience for cows and convenient management for the caretaker. Good animal shelter and feeding area design can not make up for poor (or varying) feed quality or poor management.

Animal Shelter Design Basics

Clean, healthy, productive dairy cows require at least five basic things from a dairy shelter. They include:

1) Excellent air quality, 2) a clean, dry and comfortable resting area. 3) convenient access to and supply of good quality feed, 4) convenient access to and supply of good quality water, and 5) confident footing.

Factors Influencing Feed Intake:

While good design of the feeding and drinking water areas is important, it's not the only thing that may prevent or discourage dairy cows from consuming a desired (or expected) amount of dry matter. The following factors contribute to reduced feed intake:

1) Feed not available to cows, 2) cows not available to feed, 3) Poor and/or varying feed quality, 4) undesirable eating area, 5) feed not within reach, 6) Sick cows, 7) injured cows, 8) lame cows, 9) hot cows, 10) thirsty cows, 11) submissive cows, 12) feeding area hard to get to , 13) cows associate pain with feeding, 14) not enough feeding space.

The Feeding Area—Group Housing

Proper design of the feeding area considers cow dimensions, typical bovine feeding behavior, the method of feed delivery and management of the feeding area. The feeding area should:

1) Encourage and allow each cow to consume an adequate amount of feed dry matter during each feeding episode and throughout the day., 2) provide a comfortable feeding experience for the cow, 3) facilitate 24 hour availability of high quality feed and, 4) be clean and easy to clean.

Good Access to Water

Water plays an important role in milk production, temperature control, and body functions for dairy cattle. Cows may consume 4.5 –5 pounds of water, from drinking and feed, per pound of milk produced. Providing the opportunity for dairy cows to consume a relatively large quantity of clean, fresh water is essential.

Good Ventilation

The importance of good air quality cannot be understated. Fresh, dry air is essential to the health and well-being of cows and caretakers. Good ventilation provides the necessary air exchange to remove excess moisture, gases, pollutants and heat produced by the animals, manure, bedding material, and feed stuffs. Moisture control is the primary concern. A significant amount of moisture is added to the air as cows breathe as well as evaporation from the alleys. This moisture must be removed from the building.

Confident Footing

All surfaces that cows come in contact with should provide a confident, non-skid footing. A Floor surface that provides confident footing reduces the chance of serious injury caused by slipping and falling. Also, cows are more likely to mount and show signs of estrus in a area with a good, non-skid footing.

Feed, water, and air are essential elements in the production of quality milk. The design and management of each component of a dairy shelter, which includes the feeding and drinking water areas, the resting area, floor surfaces, and ventilation system, influences the cow's willingness and ability to consume an adequate amount of dry matter. Dairy system designers need to pay close attention to the needs of cows and all aspects of the animal area when developing designs and recommendations. Dairy cows should be able to consume large volumes of fresh, good quality feed and water, easily, comfortably, and without injury. The design of the feeding and watering areas should also allow the caretaker to perform the tasks of feed delivery, observation, maintenance, and cleaning easily and safely. Access to feed and water should not limit the production and profit potential of a modern dairy enterprise. (Dan McFarland)