

# Proper Handling/Facilities Critical to Good Working Relationship<sup>1</sup>

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There is an old saying, "You can tell what kind of stockman a person is by watching the way his animals behave."

It's true. Animals that are handled gently and are allowed to become accustomed to handling procedures will experience very little stress when worked. Animal stress is important in livestock production because stress reduces an animal's ability to fight disease and gain weight. It also increases shrink, damages rumen function, and can interfere with reproduction. Reducing stress on livestock will also reduce stress on the handler.

We have all been told to talk to animals as we approach them, to approach slowly, and not to approach an animal directly from behind, but have we ever wondered why? It's because livestock (cattle, sheep, swine, and horses) have broad, panoramic vision and very limited depth perception. These are perhaps the most important factors involved in livestock handling. It means that animals are able to see all the way around them, except for small blind-spots at the nose and in the rear, and that shadows may appear as holes rather than shadows. Panoramic vision also means they are easily frightened by shadows or moving distractions outside chutes and handling areas.

With this in mind, loading ramps and handling chutes ideally should have solid side walls to prevent animals from seeing outside distractions with their wide-angle vision. Blocking vision will also help stop escape attempts. This is why a solid panel is so effective for

handling pigs. Sight reduction also lowers stress levels, thus having a calming effect on the animal.

Pigs, sheep, and cattle have a tendency to move from a dimly lit area to a more brightly lit area, provided the light does not hit them directly in the eyes. A spotlight directed on the ramp will often help keep the animals moving. Even a change in shadows from morning to afternoon can cause livestock to balk at moving up a chute or into working pen.

Moving or flapping objects can also disrupt handling. A cloth or coat swinging in the wind or turning fan blades can cause animals to balk. Movement at the end of a chute can cause them to refuse to be herded. Handlers should be aware of these potential problems when working with animals.

Livestock move and react more predictably when they are calm and feel secure. They are also more sensitive than people to high frequency noises. Excessive yelling and hollering while handling and herding livestock can cause a great deal of stress. Temple Grandin, assistant professor of animal science at Colorado State University and manager of an independent consulting business, Grandin Livestock Handling Systems, suggests that yelling be kept to a minimum when working with livestock. She says you would be amazed at how well round-up goes with very little "hooting-it-up;" however, most people insist that yelling is absolutely necessary to get the job done.

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Excited, aggressive handling causes animals to watch the activity rather than move in the right direction. Loud, abrupt noises, such as the sound of banging metal can cause distress in livestock. Therefore it is wise to install rubber bumpers on gates and squeeze chutes.

Animals will, however, readily adapt to reasonable levels of continuous sound, such as white noise or instrumental music. Producers and researchers agree that continuous radio play with a variety of talk and music can actually have a calming effect on livestock and in many cases can actually improve weight gain and prevent weight gain losses caused by unexpected loud noises.

The sense of smell is extremely important to animals, especially between females and newborns. Often animals react to odors we do not detect. For example, sheep may be lured by the smell of freshly mown hay or a bull may become aggressive when he detects a cow in heat.

## **FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT**

Facilities and equipment can make livestock handling a nightmare or a dream. Even such subtleties as color and lighting can have adverse effects animals being worked.

Keith Zoellner, extension beef specialist at Kansas State University, advises that the first points to consider when evaluating equipment and facilities are: Is the equipment/facility designed for what we're trying to make it do?; and are facilities free of hazards? Many times, Zoellner says, we overlook the little things, like picking up that loose piece of baling wire, or waiting too long to repair or pick up broken boards. These little things actually pose a threat to us and to our animals.

Zoellner points out that often we don't make adjustments or modify our equipment to make it safer because we are in a hurry or because we just want to make do with what we've got. Sometimes we have to make do for economic reasons, but there needs to be an element of common sense and safety involved in those decisions. "Because I'm in a hurry" is not a good reason for poor maintenance of equipment and facilities. Safe equipment is more of an investment than an expensive luxury.

Because livestock are able to perceive colors, handling facilities should be painted in one color only. All species of livestock are likely to balk at a sudden change in color or texture. This is also true with respect to texture changes at ground level. To judge depth at ground level the animal must stop and lower its head. This explains why animals make a complete stop to look at something strange on the ground. All livestock tend to refuse to walk over a drain grate, hose, puddle, shadow, or any change in flooring texture or surface. All these factors need to be considered when evaluating or planning livestock handling facilities.

For facilities to be functional they should be well-maintained and free of clutter. Not only is maintenance necessary for the safety of the animal but poorly kept facilities are havens for accidents that befall the handler as well.