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Low-stress handling methods keep cattle in their natural state. They are a diversion from the fear and force handling methods — which cause added stress and anxiety — that many livestock people have grown up with, explains Texas stockman Joel Ham, a guest presenter at the 2006 Cattlemen's College in Denver last January.

Low-Stress Handling: Good for Busine$$

Low-stress handling methods that keep cattle stress to a minimum make good business sense.

by Kim Kanzler Holt

When it comes to working livestock, people often adopt a lousy attitude. We want to "make" our cattle do this and "make" them do that. But Bud Williams, the Bowie, Texas, animal handling specialist known for his low-stress cattle handling techniques, advises the key isn't in the wanting and making; it's in "letting" your livestock do precisely what you "need" them to do.

Consider it a wellness approach to working cattle — much different from the two most common ways livestock are handled today: through fear and force. Many livestock people have grown up using the fear and force techniques. However, these two factors don't keep cattle in their natural state, but cause additional stress and anxiety.

Stress affects animals similar to humans: it suppresses appetite and affects digestion; it may weaken the immune system and that's when sickness and disease gain a foothold. Furthermore, research shows that unstressed animals outperform their stressed counterparts.

Joel Ham, a rancher from Big Lake, Texas, has latched onto Williams' teachings. He notes, "If our reason for owning animals is to make a profit, then we need them to perform to their maximum genetic potential. This means they must remain in their natural state as much as possible."

What Williams and proponents of his teachings advocate is good stockmanship — slowing down long enough to actually learn, observe and understand the natural tendencies, or instincts, of cattle, and then working within those boundaries.

Ham explains, "If we can learn what these natural tendencies are, then we can use them to get animals to voluntarily go where we want them to go. In doing this, we are working 'with' instead of 'against' them, and this keeps the stress level low."

Low-stress handling techniques are extremely important to the industry for several reasons. The most obvious is dollars and cents — stress has hidden costs. "You make a living from your cows, so it's just good business," Ham reminds producers. Secondly, and just as importantly, is for animal welfare reasons. Fear and force are definitely not needed in today's consumer-conscious society. It's a known fact that consumers will buy and consume a certain brand of beef because of the humane manner in which the animals were raised and handled.

"It doesn't matter whether you have a feedlot, a cow-calf operation in the mountains or a stocker operation, this can benefit you to no end," Williams professes.

Understanding natural tendencies

Ham reminds us that the main thing to remember when working cattle is they are very simple creatures. They function mainly by instinct and/or certain learned behaviors. Two types of instinctive behaviors are survival and a desire to simply move away from handlers.

When we use fear and force to make cattle go places, Ham says we put the focus on us instead of on where the cattle need to go. Whooping and hollering just add to their confusion and stress load. He says the key, therefore, is to take the focus off ourselves

Understanding cattle behavior

Cattle:

- have 360-degree vision when grazing.
- have less than 360-degree peripheral vision when their heads are raised, but can still see around themselves except for the blind spot behind them. This explains why they don't like to be pressured from behind. A good rule: if you can see the animal's eye, it can see you.
- have poor depth perception and need to lower their heads to determine distances and contrasts. This lowering is often misinterpreted as balking.
- have very sensitive hearing and are distracted by conversation. Loud noise is categorized as excessive pressure.
- have long memories and remember in what situations they were comfortable or uncomfortable.
- are social animals, comfortable in a herd. This offers shelter and safety from predators.
- are habitual and territorial. Comfort is derived from routine or their own territory.
- like to follow steady movement and prefer to move in the direction they're already facing. Fast movement heightens their stress level.
- are prey animals; therefore, they are sensitive to pressure within their own personal space known as the flight zone.
- feel less stressed if they have two or more directions to go when pressured. Excessive pressure, where animals bump and crowd in a herd, is very stressful.
- want to see who or what is pressuring them and where they can go.
- are impatient when pressured.
- respond to good handling. They are quick learners that can become conditioned to respond to pressure and look for guidance. **HW**

by learning and working within the boundaries of a beef animal's natural tendencies.

Cattle:

- like to see you.
- like to follow other animals.
- like to go in the direction they are facing.
- don't like to be pressured from behind.
- like to feel as if they are doing what they want.
- like to go around you — they don't like you to go around them.
- prefer you move in straight lines — moving in an arc tends to put their focus on you.

While one of the first keys to low-stress handling methods lies in understanding cattle instincts and sensory characteristics (see "Understanding cattle behavior"), a second key lies in interacting with the animal so that both you and the animal "agree" on the distance the animal prefers to be worked with.

As prey animals, cattle are sensitive to pressure applied within their own personal space, an imaginary circle commonly referred to as the flight zone. The size of the zone varies with an animal's sensitivity and experiences. Williams' methods are built on pressure and release — applying pressure to the flight zone to move animals and then releasing this pressure by stopping or stepping back.

The key isn't in the wanting and making; it's in "letting" your livestock do precisely what you "need" them to do.

Release is important because it rewards the animal and helps to achieve the overall goal: to convince the animal to trust and not view you as a threat. This, in turn, reduces the animal's anxiety and stress, and increases its comfort level.

Ham says, "Everything they [cattle] do is in response to what we do. You have to be willing to take responsibility for the results you get." He admits he makes handling mistakes, but the cattle are "really forgiving." Often you first have to be wrong to eventually learn the right way to handle an animal, as each has its own preference to find the correct position in which the animal prefers to be worked. It does take time, but spending time up front to condition cattle, so they recognize you as non-threatening, can save time later when cattle are moved or worked in corrals.

Slower is faster

"Some think this is the slow way to work cattle," Ham says. "But taking time now saves time later." Ham proved that doing homework with cattle sets the stage for success during his cattle handling demonstration at the 2006 Cattlemen's College, held in conjunction with the Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show this past January.

While Ham explained his actions, he "worked" 15 calves — straight from the feedlot — through low-stress pressure and release paces for some 20 minutes, moving them from one end of the arena to the other. He then proceeded to calmly gather them into a panel corral and put them through a single-file chute single-handedly.

"It is up to us to make the flight zone smaller as we work with the cattle while bringing them to the corrals," Ham explains. "We do this by applying pressure and taking it off — showing them that we will never apply more pressure than they can stand. If we don't do this, then when we get in the corral, we are way inside of their flight zone and they can't stand it.

"It is important to understand that everything we do to the animal is preparing it for the next thing. By the time they get to the gate, if they have been handled properly, they will walk right through; by the time they get to the chute, they will walk right in."

Ham emphasized, "It's not what we do to them in the chute that stresses them out, but what we do getting them there." It's the pressure cattle remember and don't like. This is one reason why, when low-stress methods are initially implemented, you may not see immediate results.

"Animals function by learned behaviors," Ham explains. "There is a training period involved so the cattle will work better." There is also a learning process for handlers. "It's a different way of thinking; it's a different mindset," he says. "As you change the way you think, you change the way you do."

Years of experience have shown Ham and Williams that domestic animals are quick learners and easy to work with, once they're given a chance. It's our attitude that is important.

Adjusting your attitude

Low-stress handling methods require humans to change their attitudes about livestock and also their instincts, such as vocalizing and chasing, which are predatory in nature and threatening to cattle.

"You need to have an open mind and a good attitude," says Tom Noffsinger, an independent feedlot, cow-calf and cattle handling veterinary consultant from Benkelman, Neb. Over the last eight years, he and Lynn Locatelli, also an independent consultant, have worked closely with Williams to develop their low-stress handling skills. They're incorporating these concepts into client operations and have spent much of the last two years teaching them to producers and feedyard team members throughout the Midwest.

"Attitude is an important word," Noffsinger says. "One of the things that Dr. Lynn and I are just starting to appreciate is how attitude-sensitive cattle are."

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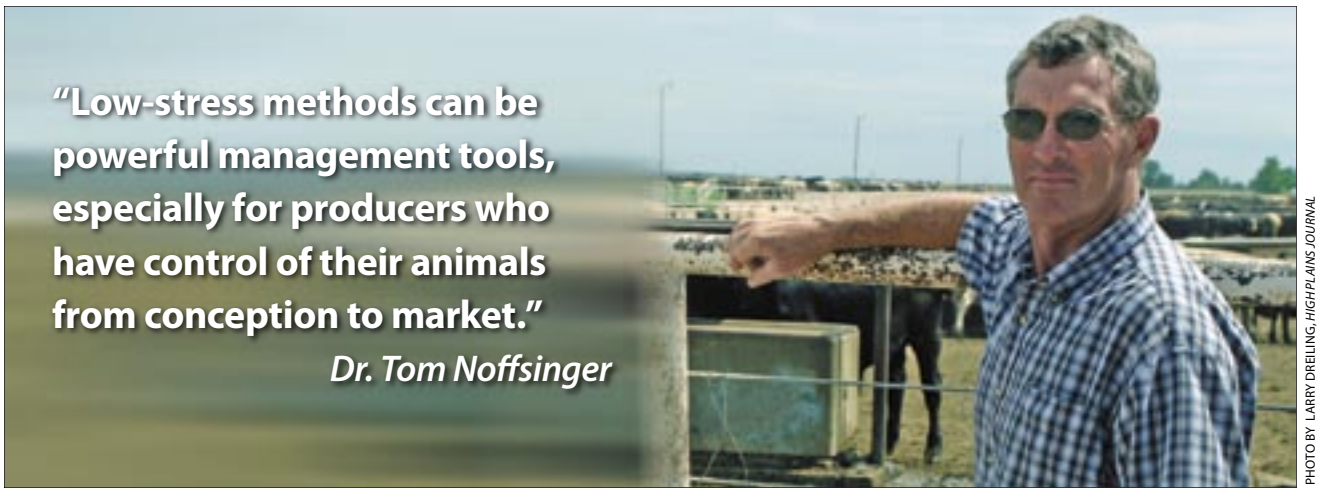

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Real-world results

Low-stress handling is a tool that can positively affect performance and profits, and, at the same time, promote animal welfare. Success with these techniques isn't something that happens overnight but is, rather, something an operation works toward.

As proof, Dr. Tom Noffsinger gives this real-world example of a 3,500-head cow-calf operation. It retains ownership and finishes all calves in its own yard. Five years ago, anywhere from 35-45% of its calves were treated for sickness from weaning to market and death loss was 7%. The calves were marketed in May and June and dark cutter incidences would range from 6-18%.

Through the adoption of low-stress handling techniques, within three years this operation had moved up its marketing dates to March and April to fit their better performing cattle. Their morbidity rate from weaning to market decreased to 7% and death loss to 0.45%. Dark cutter incidences dropped to 1.5%.

While low-stress handling can be applied at any level, it actually starts at conception. Noffsinger says they're just starting to learn more about what adverse effects stress has on pregnant females. Furthermore, they're finding that low-stress methods can be especially powerful tools for producers who have control of their animals from conception to market. "The huge impression you have on that new baby and momma the first 48 hours of life is just beyond belief," he says.

Noffsinger can be reached at (308) 882-6161. HW

PHOTO BY KIM KANZLER HOLT

Joel Ham says when we use fear and force to move cattle, we put the focus on us instead of on where the cattle need to go. The key is to take the focus off ourselves by learning and working within the boundaries of a beef animal's natural tendencies.

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He says, "They can sense if you're in a negative mood before you get out of the pickup. If you cannot adjust your attitude, but have cattle to take care of that day, you probably should have someone else do it."

Noffsinger also advises that, on operations, attitude should work from the top down. "The places where we're having the most rapid success are areas where you have absolute support and harmony from ownership and management down. You need to have buy-in from everyone on the team. It's not that everyone will make progress at the same rate, but you have to agree to try."

As a veterinarian, Noffsinger sees more and more that how cattle are handled in the feedlot makes a big difference on health, performance and end-product quality, not to mention employees. And this is why he encourages all production segments to incorporate low-stress handling techniques into management programs. It's no secret that calmer, healthy cattle perform better and that happier employees stick around.

He stresses, however, that low-stress techniques, by themselves, are not miracles. "We are not talking about replacing sound vaccination programs, good nutritional programs, or very sound diagnostic and treatment programs with low-stress handling. We're talking about combining low-stress handling to improve the efficacy of these other areas."

Which brings us back to Ham's earlier comment: "If our reason for owning animals is to make a profit, then we need them to perform to their maximum genetic potential." Therefore, low-stress handling is another management tool that's good for business, especially if you make a living from your cattle.

For more information on low-stress handling, visit Bud Williams' Web site at *www.stockmanship.com*. Joel Ham can be reached at (325) 884-2866. **HW**

Stockmanship tips

Stockman Joel Ham offers these tips for effective on-foot stockmanship in pens and around the chute.

Pressure

- Apply just enough pressure (to an animal's flight zone) to cause it to move; then be sure to remove the pressure. Pressure and release is one key to low-stress handling.
- Noise is usually classified as excessive pressure.
- Excessive pressure puts the animal's focus on you instead of where you want it to go.
- Excessive pressure creates resistance. For example, when an animal cuts back, too much pressure was applied.

Working in corrals

Moving from one corral to another

- Work from the front (cattle like to see you).
- Apply pressure to the front animals and let them pull the rest.
- Don't go around behind the cattle.

Sorting

- Work from the front.
- Move forward to get the cattle to come by you.
- Back up to slow or stop them.
- Moving sideways to stop cattle stirs them up and doesn't make them want to come by you.
- Moving to the side causes their attention to follow you, so they won't see the gate.
- Constantly read the animal; it will tell you where you need to be.

Loading the chute

- Work from the front.
- Load the crowd pen with no more than the chute will hold.
- Step down the fence to let the cattle come by you.
- If you have an automatic stop the animal must go under or push by, open it; many animals will not go through these without being forced.

Moving forward in the chute

- Walk by cattle from the front to the back.

Note: *What you did to them up until this point will determine how calm they are in the chute. The emotional state of an animal determines how stressful chute processes will be.*

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