Low-Stress Stockmanship

Proper handling pays.

by ***Heather Smith Thomas***

Low-stress handling methods continue gaining acceptance among cattle producers, as experience and research document the strategy's benefits.

For instance, Stacy Davies says low-stress handling is always beneficial and cost-saving, even on a large outfit. He manages Roaring Springs Ranch near Frenchglen, Ore., with more than one million acres with year-round grazing.

"There are financial advantages in handling cattle gently and quietly with fewer human injuries," Davies says. "We don't have people getting hurt working with cattle, like they have throughout the history of our industry. Ranching has traditionally been a rough occupation — riding fast horses to handle wild cattle. This has changed." There are also fewer animal injuries.

"Another big factor is less shrink when animals are being worked, trucked or put in feedlots," he notes. "A few years ago, I was at a feedlot that purchased our calves, and the manager commented on how much easier our calves are to handle than they were in earlier years and how they come to feed quicker when they arrive." These calves with better dispositions resulted in reduced sickness and better weight gain and performance — due to the calm attitude of the cattle.

"When trucking cattle, I've noticed that when cattle are loaded properly, they are less stressed and quieter in the truck. Shrink is not much issue for us now on a 500-mile haul. Today, it's 3% less than in the past. That's 24 pounds per 800-pound yearling, which today is a lot of money," Davies says.

Handle with care

Flighty behavior is caused by a combination of genetics and cattle handling — nature and nurture. Gentle handling can make flighty cattle less wild, and poor handling can make gentle cattle become wild and dangerous. While Hereford cattle are known for their docility, proper cattle handling is still important.

"We train cattle like we train horses, by the way we handle them," Davies says. "If handled wrong they become defensive — fight or flight."

Cattle that don't see people as often can often be harder to handle and display behavioral issues down the supply chain.

Meat quality is negatively impacted when cattle are wild; there's more bruising and trim loss. Stress hormones increase when cattle get excited, which can lead to dark cutters and tougher meat. Increased heart rate, body temperature and stress hormones affect meat quality.

Feedlots that combine quiet handling with low-stress techniques have less carcass bruising. In one study the low-stress group had about 8.35% bruising, whereas feedlots that used rough handling and yelling had a 15.5% bruising rate.

Repeated rough handling causes cattle to develop bad habits and dangerous behaviors that may negatively impact the next people who handle them — at the sale barn, feedlot or processing plant. Wild, aggressive cattle require more labor when handled and processed, whereas gentle, properly trained cattle can be easily handled with one or two people. In the feedlot, gentle cattle spend more time relaxed and at the feed bunk, gaining better than flighty cattle.

Multiple studies have shown improved weaning weights and greater post-weaning gains in cattle that are handled quietly. In one study, animals handled with low-stress methods and quiet handling gained 13 pounds more in the week after weaning than the control group that were handled in traditional ways, and the low-stress group gained 20 pounds more in the month post-weaning.

Reducing stress reduces sickness and enables cattle to get back on feed quicker after weaning. During the feeding period, stress impacts the immune system and can lead to sickness — expensive medication and additional labor to doctor sick animals.

"This is an economic factor and a human safety factor," Davies says. "Our families need to be safe, and we need to be safe working cattle. Cattle are worth a lot, and if one gets hurt or dies, that's a big loss. Low-stress handling can help avoid those losses."

Training cows starts with calves

Quiet handling doesn't just pay in the feedlot. Low-stress handling methods result in better production and profitability, and higher conception rates in cows and heifers. The younger replacement heifers are when you start handling them, the easier they will be to handle as adults.

Craig Howard, cow boss on a South Dakotan seedstock operation says if you handle cows right, their calves learn a lot just by following mama's example.

"It starts there. If your cows respect a person and respond to pressure (but not reacting in fear), their calves pick this up and learn as they go," he says.

In Howard's experience, spending five extra minutes to gently handle calves today could save more time down the road. As he notes, manhandling calves only makes them wild and fearful in the future.

"As we move calves around, we try to handle them like cows as much as possible, keeping everything low key," he says.

One of Howard's keys to properly handling cattle is learning to release the pressure. An animal that doesn't experience a release from the pressure will not learn what is

the "right" thing to do when they're being moved and sorted.

"Coming into alleys approaching the chute, many people are quiet, but then when they get the cattle right to the alley, they want to whoop and holler," he says. "This is the opposite of what you should do. It's better to put pressure on them as you approach and then ease up when they are going the right direction. If they are trying, they should get rewarded for trying."

Admittedly, it might take a few more minutes to pause the pressure and let a heifer think her way through, but she will learn from the experience and not react simply from fight or flight. This extra time is when lessons are learned.

"Any time you are around a horse, cow or your kids, you are teaching them something; you are either making things worse or making them better. We try hard to make sure whatever we are teaching them is a good thing," Howard emphasizes.

These early lessons create a cow herd that trusts and respects its handlers. While Howard doesn't expect his cattle to be so gentle that he can pet them, he demands that his cows respect him.

"We weigh every calf at birth, and most of the time we pick the new calf up and carry it down to the barn with mama following. It's not that they aren't good moms; they just respect us," he says.

While this respect is mainly built around calm, low-stress handling methods imparted at an early age, Howard acknowledges that cattle sometimes need to be reprimanded if they lose respect. For example, if a heifer tries to scoot past a handler who steps into her path, he will swing a flag in her face to show that there are consequences. He's quick to note that these corrections must be done carefully and calmly — not out of anger — because it is easier to reprimand than reward, and cattle faced with too many reprimands become more nervous and wilder in the future.

Howard's cow herd is handled extensively from the time they're weanling replacement heifers. They see people often as Howard and his crew monitor them, feed them supplement and move them place to place. By the time the females are old enough to calve, they can easily be moved through the ranch's hoop barn to calve safely and without problems.

"If they are handled correctly from the time they are young, they are not a problem," Howard says.

Correct handling, to Howard, means giving cows the space and time they need to figure things out and learn the right lessons along the way.

"Some guys get into trouble because they think cattle are just dumb animals and don't give them any respect — and don't get any respect from the cow," he adds. "One guy told me that anyone who thinks a cow is dumb has probably been outsmarted by her. We don't do anything special with our cattle, but we try to do what we believe is right."

The correct response

Handling cattle often, from the time they are young, also helps you learn how to understand and "read" them better. Bud Williams, who figured out some of the most effective ways to handle livestock, said the way to work cattle quickest is to go slowly and work them effectively — doing it right, understanding how the cattle are reading you, and being consistent in your communication with them. They move effectively when they are less stressed and more relaxed, and you don't have big wrecks.

Dr. Michelle Calvo-Lorenzo, Elanco Animal Health chief animal welfare officer, points out that cattle handling is just a stimulus-response, and the handler is the stimulus. Desirable behavior — quiet, easy-handling cattle — can be developed with careful handling that triggers the desired response. Conversely, handlers who stimulate fear and panic can create a dangerous situation where a cornered calf, for example, may attempt to charge or run over a handler, like it would a predator, if it feels like it can't get away.

"To minimize fear response, we need to minimize noise, sudden movement or aggressive

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movement," Calvo-Lorenzo notes. "It's also important to minimize distractions that might create fear or cause cattle to become stressed and agitated. You want to give them a chance to relax and trust you, and become comfortable with your handling, rather than ready to bolt."

The more cattle are worked in a low-stress manner, the calmer they become. They learn what is expected from them and know they won't be harmed.

"You want to make the first experience a positive one," Calvo-Lorenzo says. " … If they can enter quietly, with no chasing or yelling, and are then allowed to go through the chute the first time without excessive force and hurtful things done to them, they won't have an aversion to going into the corral or chute the next time."

Working quietly and consistently helps acclimate cattle to the way you will be handling them in the future — essentially training them to understand the process. The more cattle are worked quietly, the better it will go. Cattle unfamiliar with what to expect, working facilities and their surroundings experience more stress.

While many producers invest time and money in their cattle handling facilities, even the best facilities cannot make up for poor handling. And, as Calvo-Lorenzo notes, cattlemen can only truly assess the state and health of their stock when they're calm, fear free and relaxed.

Low-stress handling proves that it pays every step of the way. **BA**

Four Quick Tips for Quiet Handling

No. 1: Be confident. Whether you're calm and confident or nervous is immediately detected. "If you think you're going to get kicked or run over, you are probably going to get kicked or run over. Cattle can read your body language better than most people give them credit for," says Craig Howard, a South Dakota producer.

No. 2: Use your body language to your advantage. "Don't stand in one spot with a flag or paddle and think you will teach your cattle anything other than that they can get by you," Howard notes. He encourages new stockmen to learn to move cattle with just their body, rather than a flag.

No. 3: Cool off. "We all get mad and lose our temper, but when that happens, go find something else to do for a few minutes. The cattle will still be there, and if you are now calm and thinking about how to do things, it will go a lot better," Howard says.

No. 4: Make sure to make sense. "If you stand in front of her shaking a flag, don't expect her to walk by you," Howard says. "Sometimes, we have to swallow our pride and look at it from the cattle's point of view. If it's not working, maybe it's not the cows' fault. Don't be afraid to go about it a different way." **BA**