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Reducing stress in cattle at handling

Research has shown that changing the way cattle are handled when they go through a handling system lowers the stress they experience.

Stressed cattle have

- Lower levels of immunity e.g. more mastitis
- Lower productivity i.e. lower milk yield
- Take longer to get in calf
- Behaviour that injures the handler or themselves

When cattle are stressed they release hormones called adrenaline and cortisol - these hormones affect the animal's responses and cause the muscles to tense up and change the pH in the meat. This can result in tough meat with less flavour if they are stressed close to slaughter.



How can we reduce the stress that cattle experience when they are handled?

- Reduce noise
- Get rid of bright shiny objects and contrasting colours
- Reduce puddles
- Have less shadow and darkness

The handling system should be designed to take account of:

THE ANIMAL

- How often are they handled?
- Risk of injury is higher if animals aren't handled very often - e.g. from hills and moorland or newly calved.
- Vet work (e.g. TB testing) may increase the risk further.
- Never underestimate the risk - especially when handling bulls.

THE HANDLERS

- Have they got the know-how and experience to use the crush and handling facilities safely?
Are all the facilities fit for purpose?
- Are handlers aware of the dangers? Some work will need two people - assess the need for help.

THE RACE

- The animal should enter easily at the funnel end. A circular collecting pen and a forcing gate are ideal.
- The animals should see clearly to the crush and beyond.
- The race should have curved rather than right angled turns.
- Animals prefer to move towards a light area rather than into the dark so moving cattle from a holding pen into a dark shed will reduce ease of handling.
- The race sides should be high enough to prevent an animal escaping. If the sides are sheeted this reduces visual disturbance and makes handling easier.
- Contain the animal in the race and don't reach across it to open gates - make sure the gates in the race open and close from the handler's side.



THE CRUSH

- Secure the animal properly in the crush - head restraint and a rump rail are needed.
- Secure the crush to the ground - an agitated animal can easily lift a crush off the ground on its shoulders.
- Position the crush to allow work around it without risk of contact with other animals.
- It makes sense to work in good lighting with a crush that has gates that open smoothly with minimum noise and a slip resistant floor.
- Consider shedder gates after the crush to manage groups and if possible work undercover.



CHECK

- ✓ **The system** – The way animals respond to their surroundings really effects their overall performance. Just changing small things that keep them calm is crucial for livestock handling.
- ✓ **Handlers** – Be confident, quiet and keep a calm environment - handler behaviour really effects cattle behaviour.
- ✓ **Facilities** – Direction of flow, non-slip flooring and the layout of the design should be thought about to ensure the smooth movement of the animals

For further reading:

Improving Cattle Handling for better returns, AHDB Beef BRP Manual 3

Recommendations for the design of new, safe and efficient cattle handling systems SRUC Technical Note 565

Minor corral changes and adoption of good handling practices can improve the behaviour and reduce cortisol release in Nellore cows. Research Paper; authors Lima, M.L.P, Negrão J.A, de Paz, C.C.P, Grandin, T. 2017

Other resources:

An introduction to cattle handling systems with Miriam Parker Livestock Wise Ltd (YouTube)

