SAFELY HANDLING ANIMALS ON A BEEF FARM

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

The measures set out below are general guidelines that all persons should take into consideration to reduce the likelihood that an animal will behave in an unpredictable or aggressive way and thereby endanger either people or other animals nearby.

1. Ensure that proper equipment and facilities are available for housing and handling the type of animals on the farm with special attention to:
   • good housekeeping practices;
   • equipment, fencing and gates that are able to restrain animals safely for general maintenance or health care;
   • walking or working surfaces that are even and finished or constructed to prevent slipping under wet conditions;
   • even and diffused lighting; and,
   • alleys and chutes that are wide enough for animals to pass but not to turn around.

WHAT UPSETS CATTLE?

- Being hungry and/or thirsty
- Loud noise – dogs barking, shouting, motorbikes revving
- Being hit or beaten
- Electric prodders - use them sparingly, especially in restricted areas or on bulls
- Painful, new or strange objects
- Being chased
- People in their ‘personal space’, particularly around the head
- Sickness or injury

WHAT CALMS CATTLE DOWN?

- Working with them in a quiet, confident way
- Familiarity and familiar people
- Being with their herd mates
- Gentle, low sounds
- Rhythmical sounds
- Good feed and water supply
- Talking quietly to the animals
- Stroking
- Silence
- Good handling facilities
- Good underfoot conditions
We often put up many reasons as to why not to calve heifers at 24 months such as if they calve at 2 years they will not calve again at 3 years. The table above doesn’t really support this notion. Heifers that calved at 23-26 months had as good a calving interval and calved down again as a second calver as heifers calving down in the older age categories.

Another reason is that they are harder to calf at a younger age. The figures do show that younger heifers do have slightly higher calf mortality. On the same token heifers irrespective of age will be more difficult to calve and as the figures show will need a high level of assistance at calving. Perhaps this could be reduced if we were more selective in the sires we put on heifers. Even the younger calving heifers are being mated with sires with an average calving difficulty of 4.7%.

Interestingly our dairy counterparts try and mate their heifers calving down at two years with sires with a calving difficulty of 2% or less. We may never drop that low on the beef side but should we aim for 4% calving difficulty or less on heifers.

Heifers that calved for the 1st time at 23-26 month had greater survivability in herds with almost 40% reaching 5th parity compared to only 4% of those that calved for the 1st time at 31-35 months.

**KEY POINTS**

- Heifers that are to calf down at two years of age will:
  - Come from the best cows in the herd and be sired by bulls with strong maternal traits.
  - Be born early in the calving season to allow them to be heavier at bulling.
  - Need to achieve a daily liveweight gain of 1.1-1.3 kg/day up to weaning.
  - Have to be fed to achieve 60-80 kg liveweight over the first winter so they will need good quality silage plus 1-2 kg of concentrates.
  - Be turned out early in spring to grass to achieve good weight gain in the run up to bulling.
  - Have reached 60% of their mature weight by bulling.
  - Be bred to a known easy calving sire (ideally < 4% calving difficulty).
  - Have achieved 80% of their mature weight at calving.

| MATURE COW WEIGHT | WEANING WT. | BULLING WT. | CALVING WT. | TARGET % OF MATURE WT.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>600 KG</td>
<td>260-280 KG</td>
<td>360 KG</td>
<td>480 KG</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>700 KG</td>
<td>300-320 KG</td>
<td>420 KG</td>
<td>560 KG</td>
<td>80%</td>
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**RECOGNISING DANGER SIGNS**

Agitated cattle often bellow loudly and paw the ground with their hooves. The head and tail positions of cattle also give clues as to the animal’s state of mind. Be on the lookout for these danger signs.

**Background-Animal Characteristics and Behaviour**

The points below are provided for information purposes only and may help those handling large animals to understand why certain precautions are necessary.

**Animal Vision**

Stockpersons should be aware of the limitations of vision of the particular animal that they are working with. Animals may have:
- colour blindness;
- poor depth perception;
- sensitivity to contrasts, which may cause them to balk or hesitate at sudden changes in lighting (shadows), colour or texture;
- sensitivity to distractions or sudden movement because of wide angled vision;
- a natural tendency to move from dimly lit areas to lighter areas;
- blind spots where they cannot see a worker.

The three main themes with an impact on risk and safety during livestock handling

**TIPS FOR HANDLING ANIMALS**

- Keep animal calm - Calm animals are easier to move and load. When animals become agitated, it takes up to 30 minutes for them to calm down.
- Move animal at a walk or a trot - Injuries from falls and bruising increases when animals run into gates and fences.

Livestock with young exhibit a maternal instinct. They are usually more defensive and difficult to handle. Most animals have a strong territorial instinct and develop a very distinctive attachment to certain areas such as pastures, buildings, water troughs and worn paths. Forcible removal from familiar areas can cause animals to react unexpectedly. Similar problems occur when animals are moved away from feed, separated from the herd or approached by an unfamiliar person.

Install calving pens which are designed to protect livestock handlers (farmers, vets, relief workers etc)