

Lecture 7

Handling of Cattle

Handling cattle always involves a risk of injury from crushing, kicking, butting or goring. The risk is increased if the work involves animals that have not been handled frequently. Certain jobs, such as veterinary work, may increase the risk further. However, proper handling systems, trained and competent staff, and a rigorous culling policy can help ensure that cattle handling can be carried out in relative safety. Never underestimate the risk from cattle, even with good precautions in place.

The stockman

Everyone handling cattle should be:

- able to use the handling and other safety equipment provided;
- aware of the dangers when handling cattle and be supervised until they are competent;
- able to work calmly with the cattle, with a minimum of shouting, impatience or unnecessary force;
- in good health and properly trained in safe work methods.

Some work with cattle will need two people – always assess the need for help before beginning the task.

The equipment

Every farm that handles cattle should have proper handling facilities, which are well-maintained and in good working order. A race and a crush suitable for the animals to be handled are essential. Makeshift gates and hurdles are not sufficient, and will result in less efficient handling as well as risking injury. Never attempt to treat or work on any animal that is held by gates alone, or that is otherwise free to move at will.

The race

Check that:

- animals can readily enter the race, which should have a funnel end, and there is enough room in the collecting pen for them to feed into the funnel easily.
- animals can see clearly to the crush and beyond, so that they will readily move along the race, which may be curved, but should not include tight turns. Animals will be more prepared to move towards a light area than into the dark;
- the sides of the race are high enough to prevent animals from jumping over them, and they are properly secured to the ground and to each other;

- you can contain the lead animal in the race while it waits its turn in the crush. Hinged or sliding doors are suitable, but be sure they are operated from the working side of the race so the operator does not have to reach across it to close the gate. No one should work on an animal in the crush with an unsecured animal waiting in the race behind.

The crush

A crush which will allow most straightforward tasks to be carried out in safety (including oral treatments and work from the rear end, but not belly or foot trimming) will:

- have a locking front gate and yoke (ideally self-locking) to allow the animal's head to be firmly held. Additional head bars will prevent the animal tossing its head up and injuring people;
- have a rump rail, chain or bar to minimize forward and backward movement of the animal. Make sure this is always used;
- be secured to the ground or, if mobile, to a vehicle;
- be positioned to allow you to work safely around it, without the risk of contact with other animals, and have good natural or artificial lighting;
- allow gates to open smoothly with the minimum of effort and noise. Regular maintenance will help;
- have a slip-resistant floor, made of sound hardwood bolted into place (nails are not suitable), metal chequer-plate, or with a rubber mat over the base. Consider the need for shedder gates after the crush to allow animals to be sorted into groups. Work around the crush will be more convenient if it is under cover with a workbench nearby (for documentation, veterinary medicines, instruments etc).

Other equipment

Sticks and prods should never be used to strike an animal. Before beginning work on any animal, check that it will be adequately restrained from kicking. Consider whether you should use an anti-kicking device.

For specialist tasks such as foot trimming, use a purpose-designed crush, eg with foot restraints, belly winches and adequate space, especially at the rear end. Check that there are a minimum of trapping points so that if the animal kicks out, parts of your body will not be trapped against the crush.

Halters and ropes may be useful but will normally require specially instructed users. Always use suitable ropes - do not improvise.

The animal

Many cattle being handled will be familiar with the process - dairy cattle, for instance, will normally be handled daily. Make sure that heifers new to the milking herd, which may be less familiar with the noises, activity and personnel involved, are allowed to become accustomed to them before they are first milked.

For an animal that is habitually aggressive or difficult to handle, consider whether you should cull it from the herd. If this is not an option, ensure your equipment and systems of work are capable of dealing with it, and that staff, and other people such as vets, are aware of the potential difficulties.

Some tasks may have to be carried out in the field without adequate handling facilities. Ear-tagging may pose particular problems as it may arouse the dam's protective instincts, resulting in risks to the stockperson.

Always make sure:

- there are at least two people present if you have to separate an animal from the herd in the field, or during ear tagging with the dam unsecured;
- you have a vehicle close to where the task is to be carried out;
- the second person acts to dissuade other animals or the dam from approaching too close to the task, and warns when it is necessary to take avoiding action, eg entering the vehicle.
- If you use portable or fixed field tethers for bulls in fields, make sure:
 - the tether allows free movement with a minimal risk of entangling the bull;
 - the connection with the tether passes through the nose-ring regardless of whether or not a head, collar or chain is used;
 - you never make any connection direct to the nose-ring;
 - the tether is secured to the ground;
 - the bull's temperament is such that you can approach in safety to attach the handling ropes and poles before leading him back to the pen.

Controlling the bull out of the pen

When a stock bull has to leave the pen, use suitable equipment to secure and lead him. Consider breed, past handling and temperament to decide which of the following methods to use:

- two people, one using a bull pole attached to the bull's nose-ring and the other using a rope or chain attached to the halter or head chain via the nose-ring;

- two people both using ropes or chains, one rope or chain attached to a halter, the other either attached directly to the nose-ring or via the nose-ring to the halter;
- one person using a bull pole attached to the bull's nose-ring and a rope or chain attached to a halter, or head chain, via the nose-ring. Make sure there is a competent person standing by to help control the bull if necessary.

Bull handlers should:

- hold the bull pole, rope or chain firmly without exerting unnecessary pressure;
- keep the bull under observation;
- walk at a steady, slow pace slightly ahead of the bull; and
- keep the bull's head up at all times.
- check that handling, weighing, veterinary treatment and shedding arrangements are safe and designed for the often greater strength and volatility of a group of young bulls;
- arrange your race, crush and loading areas so that no one ever needs to be in them with the animals.
- A properly designed loading area will allow you to keep parts of the fixed handling system or the lorry tailboard gates between you and the animals at all times.
- Keep yard or farm perimeter gates closed when loading bulls to contain an escaped animal within the yard or farm.
- Never enter a pen containing, and never allow a lone person to handle, bull-beef animals.

Common Cattle Diseases and Prevention

African Sleeping Sickness (African trypanosomiasis)

It is also called Nagana disease and it's an infectious disease caused by protozoa (*Trypanosoma brucei* and *Trypanosoma congolense*). They invade the nervous system causing lethargy, drowsiness or sleepiness and finally death. The trypanosomes are spread from host to host via saliva by blood sucking tsetse flies. It is difficult to control, because many wild animal serve as a reservoir of trypanosomes. Prevention is dependent upon control of the tsetse fly vector by means of insect repellents, insecticides and bush clearing.

Heart Water

This is a tick borne disease transmitted by ticks and the causative organism is *Rickettsia rumenatum*. The imported cattle are more susceptible to the disease than the indigenous cattle. The disease develops rapidly within 24 hours and if not quickly treated the animal will die instantly. An intensive spraying programme will prevent the animal from coming down with the disease. The tick can create an open wound on the animal and predispose it to other attacks of agents of disease.

Streptothricosis (Kirchi)

This is a skin disease caused by the fungus *Actinomyces*. This disease is very common in the high plateau areas of the country e.g. Obudu, Mambilla and Plateaux cattle. Usually mortality from the disease is very low but it has a debilitating effect on the animal thereby reducing their productivity. Most affected animals are very unthrifty, if lesions are around mammary gland. The animal gradually wastes away. It is also difficult to milk the cow. The imported cattle breeds are highly susceptible. The N'Dama is known to be resistant to the disease.

Rinderpest (Cattle plague)

This is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus. It is common among the nomadic herds, but with a programme of immunization, the disease has been brought under control.

Brucellosis (Undulant Malta Fever)

It is a hidden disease but one of the most serious and widespread affecting the livestock industry. It is caused by *Brucella suis*, *Brucella melitensis* and *Brucella abortus*. The act of abortion is the most characteristic symptom in cattle. It is rather common in goats but rare in sheep. There is no successful treatment. It is controlled by eliminating infected animals and vaccination.

Tuberculosis

It is a chronic infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* of which there are three kinds namely: The human, The bovine and The avian (bird) types. Animals usually get tuberculosis of the lungs and lymph nodes in cows. The udder sometimes becomes infected and swollen in chronic cases. Often, infected animals show no outward physical signs of the disease. There may be loss in weight, swelling of joints and a chronic cough and labored breathing. Other seats of infection are genitals, central nervous system and the digestive system. No known medical treatment is effective with animals. It can be controlled by disposing of tubercular swine, cattle and poultry, applying strict sanitation and rotating feedlots and pastures. Also, pasteurization of milk and creamery by-products.