

MAFES Dawg Tracks



November 19, 2007

Working Safely with Livestoc



Many folks involved with handling livestock seldom stop to consider why animals behave the way they do. Do we consider that this behavior could very well cause a threat to personal safety? It has been stated that animal handling practices are sometimes inherited. Sometimes they watch others, and other times they rely upon their own experience in growing up around cattle and livestock.

In most all cases injuries from animals aren't fatal, but many people are injured each year because of safety unawareness. Missed days of work, broken bones, mashed limbs, sometimes partially or full disability, and enormous amounts of unnecessary medical expenses result from animal-related accidents. Individuals can work carefully around animals for many months and even years, but because of impatience, preoccupation, haste and maybe anger... "BAM," we lose focus and then the problem starts. It's the times like those mentioned above that the livestock handler needs to really understand animal behavior.

TRAITS OF AWARENESS IN ANIMALS:

Beef, swine and dairy cattle are for the most part colorblind. This makes them extremely sensitive to color contrasts. This sensitivity can make them balk quickly to shadows or contrasts of light and darks. Sheep are considered to be colorblind, but have excellent depth perception. They do have a good bit of difficulty in picking out small details like open spaces by a partially opened gate.

Cattle, horses and mules have a panoramic field of vision, which means that they can see everything around them, but not directly behind their hindquarters. This means that walking up beside one of these animals is less shocking to them than walking from behind. As we know, horses and mules always kick backwards and cattle will kick out sideways or forwards. Cows may also kick to their side, which could cause a bruise or other type of injury.

Livestock, like other types of animals, have the natural instinct of protecting their young. They usually are more defensive and difficult to handle. As a result of this maternal instinct, it is a good idea to try to keep the young close to their "moms."

Most animals have a strong sense of territorial instincts and develop a pseudo "homeland" in their pens, lots, corrals or pastures.

When we understand these territorial instincts, it makes it easier to see why animals are hesitant to be forced into new paths of egress to different pens or to be moved to different pastures. Animals are extremely sensitive to noise. When noises spook the animals, their instinct tells them to leave and find a more noise-friendly territory. In looking for this new territory, it may trigger them to break through gates, fences and even people, if they happen to be in their paths.

Animals are like humans in that they have an innate sense of human treatment. If we treat the animals with respect, such as soft talking and show a genuine respect for them, they will become responsive and easier to handle. On the other hand, if we are disrespectful to them by yelling, kicking, or beating them, then their demeanor will end just like a human with this same treatment, very defensive and hard to control.

Other traits that animals have that resemble those of humans are the senses of hunger, thirst, pain, fear and strong maternal instincts. Their response may come in the form of biting or kicking. Handlers should be aware of this and take the necessary precautions for protection. This isn't a common practice for folks that I know in the cattle business, but wearing the proper personal protective equipment would give extra protection, such as using goggles, hard-toed boots, gloves, shin guards, etc.

WORKING FACILITIES:

Good working facilities can play a major role in preventing accidents. The facilities that have the good stalls and hallways and smooth walking surfaces will have more success with working the animals than those that have uneven and unstable walkways. The facilities that have corners in the walking chutes, as opposed to those using circular facilities, are more prone to animal-related accidents because animals, especially cattle, are spooked by shadows and dark areas. With circular sections of fencing for the working chutes, it really improves the temperament and control of the animals. Using Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCI's) around water heaters or other electrical power equipment can be a large help in avoiding shock accidents.

We can reduce the chance for accidents with farm animals if we learn to understand their behavior, provide proper and safe facilities, protect against zoonotic diseases and wear personal protective equipment.