

# MAFES Dawg Tracks



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Safety Tips: Cattle Handling



A 1997 study conducted by the Bio-Systems and Agriculture Engineering Department at Oklahoma State University described conditions associated with 150 cattle handling injury cases on 100 Oklahoma cow-calf handling operations. The study showed that more than 50% of the injuries in these situations were due to human error, while equipment and facilities accounted for about 25% of the perceived causes. In most cases, a better understanding of how an animal may respond to human interaction and to its immediate surroundings will help keep the worker from becoming an injury victim.

## HUMAN ELEMENT

Human error is the primary cause of many types of accidents. These errors in judgment and action occur for several reasons: tiredness, hurried, upset, preoccupied or just careless. Also remember that physical, psychological and physiological factors greatly affect the occurrence of life threatening accidents. Remembering these factors and proper cattle handling techniques can reduce the number of injuries.

## ANIMAL BEHAVIOR

Having a good working knowledge of the cattle behavior can help farm and ranch workers avoid potentially dangerous situations. Dr. Temple Grandin, Colorado State University animal behavior specialist, states that knowing the traits of animals and how they think and function goes a long way in reducing the risk of injury. Senses of animals function much like humans.

But, animals do detect and perceive their environments very differently as compared as to the way humans detect and perceive the same surroundings. Cattle have poor color recognition and poor depth perception, but they have extremely sensitive hearing relative to humans. Knowing these traits in cattle helps us to understand why they are sometimes skittish or balky in unfamiliar surroundings.

## ANIMAL VISION

Cattle have panoramic vision, which means that they can see in all directions, except directly behind without moving their head. For them to see in depth, they have to bow their head. This is the reason that when they see unfamiliar objects and shadows, they balk; this is the reason that you see them holding up animals behind them. This is the reason that working facilities should be constructed to reduce shadows as much as possible. Cattle also have a tendency to move toward light. Dr Grandin recommends that frosted bulbs should be used to reduce the amount of glare in the animals' faces.

## FLIGHT ZONE

The flight zone is the animals' personal space. It is necessary to have a good knowledge of this zone.

When a person enters this flight zone, the animal will move. In reverse to this, when the person moves out of the flight zone, the animal will stop. The size of the "zone" depends upon the fearful and docile behavior of the animal, the angle of approach of the handler and its state of excitement. It's good to work from the edge of their zone at an angle behind the cattle. If you are within their zone, they will move away or retreat.

When moving cattle, avoid approaching them directly. Try to work them close to the point of balance, moving back and forth in a line parallel to the direction that the animal is traveling. It is important to understand the "herd instinct." Cattle follow a leader and are motivated to follow each other. They need to see the others in front of them. We don't need to force an animal into a single chute unless it has a place to go. If the cow balks, it will continue to balk.

In crowding pens, consider handling cattle in small groups of up to ten head. They need room to turn. Wait until the single file chute is almost empty before turning in another group. If you have a stubborn cow refusing to move, turn her out and put her with another group. It is not good to leave a single cow in a crowding pen as they may become agitated and try to jump the fence.

## WORKING FACILITIES

**Crowding areas** should be designed so that the cattle can move easily into the area from a common sorting alley which would be adjacent to holding pens. A circular crowding area with totally enclosed sides and a gate is good because they only have one route of egress. This helps with animal flow and safety. Broom finished concrete floors furnish an all-weather surface and proves to be safer.

The crowding gate should also be solid and designed to prevent animals from reversing the gate's direction. The **working chute** should also be curved with totally enclosed sides. Cattle will move more freely because they cannot see the handlers or squeeze chute until they approach the cage or rear gate of the squeeze chute. Sloped sides in the working chute restrict the animal's feet and legs to a narrow path. This helps to reduce balking and preventing an animal from turning around.

Overhead restrainers help to prevent the animals from rearing up and turning around and sometimes from falling over backwards in the chute. Some restrainers can be adjustable for taller cattle. **Emergency release panels** are highly recommended with or without the use of overhead restrainers. This aids in the release of animals that have fallen down or become lodged.

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