

# MAFES Dawg Tracks



June 22, 2009 *Understanding Livestock Behavior*



Poor judgment, a lack of understanding, and sometimes carelessness contribute to accidents involving livestock. We can avoid accidents when working with cattle or livestock in general, if we would take the time to:

- Evaluate our knowledge of animal behavior.
- After evaluation, practice safe handling of livestock procedures.

## **BACKGROUND OF ANIMAL BEHAVIOR:**

Beef, dairy cattle, pigs and sheep are all generally color blind and have poor depth perception. This trait can cause the animals to balk or resist being handled. Sheep have difficulty seeing small details like an open gate.

Cattle, horses and mules have a panoramic field of vision. This means that they can see everywhere but behind them. By knowing this about the animals, we should always approach them from the front or side to prevent scaring them. Horses and mules generally always kick toward their hindquarters and cows will kick forward or out. Injured cows will kick from the side of the injury.

Livestock (like any animal) with a baby at their side has strong, maternal instincts so they will be protective of their young, and this sometimes makes them hard to handle. With this point in mind, we should allow the young to stay close to their mother when handling or moving them and move around them with caution.

Most animals are a lot like humans. They will form territorial instincts and become accustomed to their pens, corrals, or pastures. When we understand this trait about them, it becomes easier to realize why they are sometimes hesitant and stubborn when they are moved to unfamiliar surroundings. Forcing them to move can cause unpredictable behavior.

Animals are sensitive to noise and become easily aroused or afraid. We should move slowly and quietly when handling them.

## **ANIMAL BEHAVIORS:**

- Most animals, like us humans, respond to calm, gentle, and consistent handling.
- Livestock becomes skittish when their ordinary routines or familiar surroundings change.
- Animals have a definite social order.
- Domestic livestock, especially cattle and sheep, are herd animals. They may become agitated when they are isolated and will try to return to the group.
- Livestock detects people by their movement, which is more important to animals than what is moving.

## **WHEN WORKING WITH ANIMALS:**

- Move quickly, deliberately, and patiently. Avoid quick movements or loud noises that may startle animals.
- The daily routine or the animals' living conditions should not be altered. Animals often balk at anything out of the ordinary.
- Always have an escape route when working in close quarters with animals.
- Avoid scaring the animal. Make it aware of your approach before getting too close to it.

## **BASIC POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- Beef, swine, sheep and dairy animals are all colorblind.
- Cattle, horses and mules have a panoramic field of vision.
- Livestock have strong maternal instincts.
- Animals respond to the way they are treated by humans in past experience.
- Livestock are sensitive to noise and are frightened easily.

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