

Dairy Keeper News & Information Notice 2009

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News & Information Notice Subject: - First Rule in Handling Cows

ST. PAUL, Minn. —This year I have spent many days at dairies in Minnesota and South Dakota collecting data for an observational study on dairy housing and well-being. I have noticed the wide differences among the operations we are working with for the project.

In some dairies, cows run away from us, whereas in others, the opposite is the case. Treatment of cows by the workers in the parlor and holding area also varies widely.

Farm animals are often subjected to aversive handling, which can result in them becoming fearful of humans. Fear of people can reduce animal well-being and possibly milk production, and increase the risk of injury to both animals and handlers.

Studies conducted in Australia by Hemsworth's group indicated that 20 percent of the variation in milk production among dairies was due to cow handling. Where restlessness was high, productivity was low. Restlessness, which they measured by the number of flinch, step and kick responses, indicates stress.

If animals become fearful of humans due to inadequate handling, they may experience acute or even chronic stress in the presence of humans. Negative behaviors by handlers include hits, slaps, tail twist, shouting, and fast speed of movement; positive behaviors include stroking, rubbing, hand resting on the animals back or flank, and slow and deliberate movement and talking.

When handling cattle, it is important to understand that cows interpret sights and sounds in a different way than humans. Cows have poor depth perception and cannot focus quickly on close objects. Cows usually lower their heads to look at something because their vertical vision is only about 60 degrees (compared to 140 degrees in humans).

They will also walk slowly in unfamiliar environments. Cows should be given enough time to move and walk at their own pace without being rushed. Cows can hear well and don't like high, screeching sounds. Hitting or yelling (and loud swearing) can create a lot of fear and stress. Cows feel safer in a crowd, so they can be nervous when alone.

Slow and quiet are two basic rules for working with cows. Avoid situations that can create fear in cows, and use every opportunity for positive human contact, starting at a young age. By following these rules, the job will be done faster with less stress to the cows. We should all be known for "loving" our animals and that includes treating them with care and respect.

Source of Information: Iowa State University, University Extension 01/05/2009.