

General Sessions

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Cattle Handling Skills—Contributor To Animal Welfare: The Veterinarian's Role

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Abstract

Veterinarians can positively impact the level of animal welfare in cattle operations by learning and teaching low-stress handling methods. Shifting caretaker priorities from disease detection to performance enhancement results in improved levels of cattle welfare.

Introduction

Webster defines welfare as health, happiness and general well-being. We have a responsibility to provide cattle with physical comfort, disease protection, required nutrients and emotional wellness. Veterinarians understand that physical and psychological stress play important roles in cattle disease resistance and performance levels. Caretakers can be trained to realize that all human contact with cattle impacts animal well-being. Cattle can be easily trained to work for handlers, and this training process reduces cattle stress levels. Handler interactions can have either a positive or negative impact on cattle health and performance.

Communication of State of Health

Numerous investigations document our inability to determine the state of health of cattle, especially those in confinement. Slaughter audits, like those reported by Bryant *et al* in *The Bovine Practitioner* 1999, indicate no correlation between lung lesions at slaughter and treatment histories. The fact that cattle lacking treatment histories for respiratory disease were just as likely to have lung lesions as treated cattle demonstrates the need for veterinarians to improve their abilities to train caretakers. Caretakers must be able to encourage

cattle to communicate their true state of health. Understanding predator-prey animal interaction and the sensory perception of cattle is pivotal to low-stress handling success. These concepts transform handlers from a predator status with tendencies to chase and yell to leaders that guide cattle and create wellness.

Why Train Cattle?

Cattle are easily trained and learn quickly. Handlers apply pressure to cattle—to ask for motion. Motion (response by the cattle) is rewarded by the release of pressure. The release of pressure is a reward and signal to the cattle that they responded favorably. The release of pressure (the reward) is the key principle in successfully getting cattle to work for you. It is imperative that handlers understand that subtlety and sensitivity are what keeps prey animals alive—so, subtle movement, correct body position and correct working angles are instrumental in guiding the direction of cattle motion.

Conclusion

Caretakers can have a positive impact on cattle health and performance. Cattle are easily trained to respond to the application and release of pressure, and become more willing to communicate their true state of health and wellness when they realize that handlers are not predators. Caretakers that concentrate on low-stress handling skills increase their powers of observation, recognize abnormal behavior and attitude and develop the confidence and skill to manipulate behavior to improve levels of animal welfare.