



Cow handling: reducing herd and staff stress

In this two-part series we take a look at 'low-stress' cow handling and management.

Part 1: Cow psychology and behaviour

Part 2: Cow communication

Sight and sound play a key role in red

Take a cow

Here, in the second of two articles on better cow handling, we take a closer look at cow communication. And we find out why cows always look at potential threats with their left eye first.

text **Alice Booij**

Understanding cow behaviour and how they see and react to the environment, are all key to easier, more efficient and – most importantly – safe handling. And Dutch dairy specialist Ronald Rongen has a wealth of knowledge and experience in this area, much of it gained in the US and Canada where he met Bud Williams and Temple Grandin – two cow handling and stockmanship ‘gurus’.

“On Grandin’s advice, more than 90% of US slaughterhouses have adapted their supply route, so that animals pass through the abattoir smoothly and without stress,” he says. “This is better for animal welfare, but less stress at slaughter also produces better quality meat both in terms of taste and texture.”

Bud Williams was, by his own admission, a cowboy without training. But he got the animals exactly where he wanted them. His methods are still very much in use today, particularly on units that have consulted with Mr Rongen. “His methods, which very much involve understanding the cow, her perspective and what causes stress, mean that handling can be both easier and safer.”

Mr Rongen worked on dairy units throughout Europe, helping producers to improve their stock handling technique by communicating with their cows. “In Germany, insurance companies have even gone so far as to organised stockmanship courses, to allow dairy producers to handle their livestock more safely. And producers building new cow houses and other dairy facilities will also consult with my team, in a bid to design systems that will facilitate easier, safer and low-stress cow handling and routing,” he says.

Aggressive behaviour

Mr Rongen receives regular calls about cows that seem to have an aggressive nature or character. “Genetics account for 15% of a cow’s character and the environment, or how the cow is handled, has a much bigger impact on her temperament and behaviour,” he says.

“So there is plenty that producers can do to influence cow character. Cattle labelled as problematic and aggressive are not,” insists Mr Rongen. “These animals simply have a problem with the way people

interact with them and are reacting to this. “To quieten them, producers must adopt some basic principles in cattle behaviour. And the first is to recognise that cows think differently to humans, Shouting, shooing and prodding with sticks really doesn’t have a place on a dairy unit if you want to reduce cow stress and improve cow flow.”

The cow’s ‘ruminant’ nature means that she likes things to be slow – she likes to rest and ruminate. “She is also a herd animal, so she will always stay close to the other animals and, wherever possible, do the same things at the same time – be that eat, drink or rest. So don’t focus your energy on the cows that lag behind – they will catch up all by themselves as their instinct is to join the rest of the herd. They don’t want to be separated from the herd. In the wild, that would be suicide.”

Another important biological fact is that humans are ‘predators’ and cows are ‘prey’. “So it’s instinctive for a cow to want to get away from you when you move too close to her. When a producer wants to move a cow, or a few cows, it’s this reaction by the cow or cows that causes her to move,” says Mr Rongen. “Action creates a corresponding response. When you move towards the cow, she will move. So it’s all about moving towards the cow or cows in the correct way, so you can make sure they move in the direction that you want them to move in.”

Leading eye

When a person enters the cow house or field, cows will always look at them with their left eye. “And this is an important point fact when handling and moving cattle,” Mr Rongen says. “The left eye connects to the right side of the brain, just as it does in humans. And it’s in the right side of the brain where the cow’s ‘safety coordination centre’ is located,” he explains. “This part of the brain identifies any potential threat, and signals any actions that need to be taken. So a cow will always look at you with her left eye, to assess whether you’re a danger.”

With this in mind, producers should approach cows from the left. “Then they are quieter because they can see where any potential danger may come from.” This is why handlers will walk on the left with a

ucing stress and improving cow flow

's-eye view



Ronald Rongen: "Cows prefer low frequency sounds – they have sensitive hearing"

haltered cow – just as they would with a horse. "This means that the left eye is on the handler at all times and the cow can be reassured that there's no threat. And turning to the left is also easier and less stressful for the cow, for the same reason," says Mr Rongen.

Sensitive hearing

What about talking to your cows? Do a few words sooth them or offer encouragement? "Well, you're certainly not doing any harm by talking to your cows," Mr Rongen says. "But it doesn't really help. Cows will probably be more nervous because they have a very sensitive hearing."

He explains that the sensitivity of the human ear varies between 20 and 20,000 hertz, but in cattle it is between 23 and 35,000 hertz.

"They hear the same bass tones as we do, but are much more sensitive to higher tones, so they can even hear the ultrasound emitted by bats.

"Thunder won't bother them, due to the low tones. But creaming' of fireworks, for example."

For this reason, Mr Rongen discourages the use of radios in the cow house or milking parlour. "And cows can also detect your mood through the tone of your voice. If you are distressed or angry, that affects your voice and the cows will notice.

"So keeping calm will be good for you and your cows. Not always easy if you're having a bad day.

"But it does explain why a stressful morning milking often results in more faeces in the parlour. Something to keep in mind if you want to help to keep scraping up and washing down to a minimum." |