



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**

Move cows safely and quietly

Slow and steady

Here, in the first of two articles, we take a closer look at cow behaviour and psychology in a bid to reduce cow – and producer – stress levels when moving cattle and to improve productivity.

text **Alice Booij**

Moving stock is instinctive for producers, who draw on many years of experience when handling their herds. Yet stories of stock – and not just bulls – turning on producers are all too common. Cows can cause serious injury too. And much of this is down to poor 'communication' or a lack of understanding when it comes to the cow's perspective, according to Netherlands-based dairy specialist Ronald Rongen, from Netherlands-based Low Stress Stockmanship.

"This approach isn't about teaching grandma to suck eggs. Producers know how to drive cattle – how to move them to where they want them to be. But what they're not always so good at is moving them easily and safely – and in a low-stress way," he says. When moving animals, there are – according to Mr Rongen – some golden rules. "The first is allowing the cow to see you. She wants to see who's driving her, so make sure you are in her line of sight of the cow and make eye contact," he says, adding that the cow must feel that she is moving of her own free will. "The old thinking is 'fast from A to B', the new thinking is, when you want to do it quickly, you have to slow it down."

Comfort zone

Mr Rongen explains that for a cow to move she must feel a certain amount of 'pressure' to do so. "She'll feel this when you get into her inner circle, or her comfort zone. The cow doesn't like this pressure, she will try to avoid it by walking away. Compare it to someone who comes very close to you, then you'll also take a step back," he says.

Taking a step back and reducing pressure causes the cow to walk in the desired direction. "She walks the way her eyes look. Working in this way takes practice. Try it and see what happens."

With calm 'driving' you will teach animals to 'obey'. "Cattle breeders teach animals to accept authority by driving. And the best way to drive also requires some practice. When you approach a cow at shoulder height she will stop and, if you're behind her, you run the risk of getting kicked," explains Mr Rongen. "So the ideal position to approach from is in the middle, about the loins, and on the left side of the

cow. If you move quietly towards the cow at a 40° to 45° angle, she will respond when you get into her comfort zone. That distance can be different for each cow."

Walk slowly

Time is also an important factor. Although cows can move at high speeds, they feel most comfortable walking at pace of 2.5km/hour. The optimal walking speed for humans is between four and five kilometres per hour. "So that means you really have to walk very slowly and at her reduced pace."

The response time of cows is also seven times slower than that of humans. "When you move, cows see that in slow motion." Also, in the transition from a light to a dark room or the other way around, a cow responds slowly. "Just give her some more time to adapt," says Mr Rongen. Producers are the leaders of their herd and the cows accept that and, on the whole, 'respect' them. "And that's really important. Animals without respect are the most dangerous. That's particularly true with bulls."

Respect is earned by the producer as they rear their cattle. And here Mr Rongen is insistent that producers should never allow cows or calves to lick them: "This is lower ranking behaviour and, affectionate as it may seem, it's quite damaging in terms of commanding respect."

Sniffing and 'smelling' is allowed, but stroking heads is not. "There are a lot of nerve endings in the head. And you stimulate and activate them through stroking," explains Mr Rongen. "In bulls, you will also develop the use of their head and this could have disastrous effects when they are older. They'll get aggressive. Stroking is allowed, but under the head or across the neck."

Blind spots

Another biological fact about cows is that they have both two- and three-dimensional visibility, because the eyes of a cow are on the side of their head. "And she also has two blind spots," says Mr Rongen. "These are directly behind the animal and straight in front of the nose."

What about colour blindness? "That has been said

with 'low-stress' stockmanship

y wins the race



Ronald Rongen: "It's important to slow down and move at the cows' pace"

about cows, but was mainly because nobody really knew. Today there is more reliable information and we now know that cows can distinguish the colours green, blue and yellow. "That is, of course, both clever and essential – grass is green, the sky is blue and some poisonous plants are yellow," adds Mr Rongen.

Smooth flow

In a practical sense, the 'slow' driving technique can be used effectively to move cows out of cubicles and other areas. "Find the cow's comfort zone, exert pressure and take a step back," reiterates Mr Rongen. "It really does work so much better than 'pushing' or slapping the cow."

And for a smooth flow through the milk parlour this technique also works. And there's the promise of additional milk yield due to reduced stress levels – studies have measured as much as an additional 1.5 litres per cow per day.

"When cows leave the parlour, try to get out of the cow's comfort zone," explains Mr Rongen. "Don't walk along the parlour pit from tail to head, because cow flow will stop. Moving from head to tail in one line and then move back as far as possible from the cows," he adds. He says that this can be difficult to do in some parlours because the pit is too narrow: "This makes it difficult to stay out of the cow's comfort zone. As far as I am concerned, parlour pits should be designed to be considerably wider."

This way of moving cattle requires some practice. "But eventually it saves time, it improves cow welfare and milk production should increase, because there is less stress. That's beneficial to the cow and the producer." |