

Agricultural Farm Safety: Working Safely with Livestock

HIGHLIGHTS:

- ABCs of Safe animal handling
- Do's and Don'ts of working with livestock
- Personal protective equipment
- Danger signs

Understanding basic livestock behaviors and reactions along with practicing safe animal handling techniques can help make the farm/workplace safer for everyone. This reference contains suggested guidelines to follow when working around livestock.

ABC's of Safe Animal Handling

- Avoid dangerous situations.
- Be calm, quiet and capable of handling livestock. Never become complacent or over-confident.
- Common sense should never be ignored.¹

Depending upon the source viewed, injuries on a farm caused by animals occur in one out of three, to one out of every eight injuries. Regardless of the source, injuries caused by animals ranks second in frequency to injuries as a result of farm machinery. Interestingly, a University of Minnesota Extension document indicates that farm family members were by far the most frequent victims of animal-related incidents. Hired help and visitors account for less than 10%.

If you are frequently around livestock, it may be easy to take the animals for granted and become comfortable around them. Even though livestock may be domesticated (or tame) and may appear to be docile, it is important to respect them for their size and natural instincts. Safe livestock handling requires a keen sense of awareness.

Working with Livestock

Do!

- Know the characteristics of animal vision and hearing. Animals are extremely sensitive to noise.
- Let your presence be known to the animal before getting too close in order to prevent startling the animal.
- Avoid the kicking region when approaching an animal. Cattle, horses and mules have a panoramic field of vision. They can see all around them except for their hindquarters.

- Touch the animal gently. In addition to unique vision characteristics, sensitivity to noise and a strong territorial instinct, animals have physical and mental sensations similar to those of humans that can cause them to react fiercely to handlers.
- Know the danger signs in livestock behavior. See below for more information.
- Maintain good housekeeping and even lighting throughout facilities where animals are being held.

Do not!

- Expose animals to loud noises.
- Make any quick or sudden movements around the animals.
- Expose animals to cluttered alleyways and walking surfaces.
- Enter a small enclosed area with an animal unless there is a man-gate or other means of egress.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Personal protective equipment (PPE), such as leather steel-toed boots and leather gloves, are essential for protection while working around livestock. Other PPE should be selected based on the work situation. Dust masks can be used to reduce the exposure to dusts and other respiratory hazards. Gloves, goggles and/or a facemask should be worn when handling sick animals. Use your best judgment when selecting PPE for a task. Refer to the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) when handling chemicals, drugs or supplements.

Facilities and Equipment

Facilities can play a major role in preventing incidents. Handling operations should be performed in solid, well-built structures/facilities. Holding pens should have a man-gate to ensure the worker has an exit route if necessary. Keep livestock areas free of hazards, such as improperly designed chutes and lanes, sharp protrusions, and a lack of escape for human occupants.

Other facilities tips include:

- Design facilities to allow easy egress from animal enclosures.
- Alleys and loading chutes should be narrow and not allow the animal to turn around.
- Alleys and chutes should be free from obstacles that may harm the animals or workers.
- Fixed chutes should allow the worker to access the animal without having to reach into the chute.
- Use animal restraining equipment consistently and properly. Inspect the equipment regularly for excessive wear and breakage, and make sure the equipment is in good working condition.
- Use anti-kick and back-up bars whenever possible to prevent kicks and sudden movements.
- Post “LIVESTOCK PRESENT” warnings signs in designated areas to warn visitors.
- Keep untrained/unqualified persons out of pen areas, as animal behavior can be unpredictable.

Animal Instincts and Reactions

Livestock have various instinctive behaviors. Knowledge is the key to safe livestock handling. Some instinctive animal behaviors to be aware of are noted below.

- Livestock with their offspring exhibit deep maternal instincts. Protection of the young offspring can make them extremely difficult to handle and very defensive. DO NOT get in between a mother and her young. If possible, allow the young to stay close to the adult.
- Animals have a strong territorial instinct. They can develop a strong connection or attachment to certain areas like pastures, buildings, water troughs, worn paths, etc. Removing them from these places can cause the animal to act unpredictably.
- Animals have a herd instinct. If an animal is removed from its original herd, it will attempt to rejoin the herd.
- Animals can exhibit herd hierarchy, which means the animal may try to assert its dominance over a handler or other animals. Male livestock can be naturally aggressive. They may become especially aggressive around breeding females.

- Animals may have reactions to sudden movements and noises beyond human hearing. Avoid using moving or flapping objects as these can cause the animals to balk or run wildly.
- Sudden or loud noises can frighten animals or cause panic.
- If threatened, the animal may kick from its hind quarters.

Livestock Sensory Issues

In general animals have:

- Bad depth perception
- Color-blindness
- Panoramic vision with the ability to see everything around them except their hind quarters
- Sensitivity to contrasts in light and fast movements
- Extremely sensitive hearing

Lighting

Lighting in the handling facility should be evenly diffused. To minimize the effects of their sensory issues, one color used throughout the facility can eliminate bright spots, glare and shadows. Animals will move more easily from dim areas to lit areas as long as the light does not hit them directly in the eyes. Lighting on ramps helps animals to move in the direction that is desired.

Danger Signs

Danger signs exhibited by livestock include:

- Raised or flattened ears
- Raised or rapidly lashing tail
- Raised hair on the back
- Bared teeth
- Rolling eyes
- Making unusual or distressed cries
- Climbing on other animals to escape
- Snorting, tossing the head, pawing the ground
- Stiff-legged gait or posture
- History of previous aggression

Maintaining Health and Hygiene for Livestock

Maintaining proper ventilation and sanitation in confined areas is very important to both worker and herd health. Doing so will likely minimize exposures to toxic substances and reduce the risk of a respiratory or digestive problem such as farmer's lung or organic toxic dust syndrome.

It is important to be extremely careful when administering vaccinations. All needles and antibiotics should be covered and stored in a safe place. Refer to the MSDS when applicable.

Good hygiene practices help limit the exposure to human-transmission of diseases. Wear rubber gloves while working with sick animals and always thoroughly wash your hands and face after handling animals.

Summary

Understanding basic livestock behaviors and reactions along with practicing safe animal handling techniques can make the farm/workplace safer for everyone. Most animal-related incidents are the result of poor animal handling, so plan ahead and behave methodically to understand and anticipate animal behaviors and to reduce the likelihood of injury to workers and animals.

References

1. Nova Scotia Canada, Department of Agriculture, Farm Safety - Protect Yourself from Livestock Injuries. <http://www.gov.ns.ca/agri/farmsafety/livestock>

Resources

National Safety Council, Livestock Handling Fact Sheet, 1995-2005. http://www.nsc.org/news_resources

Kubik, Rick, The Farm Safety Handbook, Voyageur Press, St. Paul, MN, 2006.

Farm Safety Association. <http://www.farmsafety.ca>

University of Minnesota Extension Service, Safety with Animals, http://nasdonline.org/static_content/documents/1628/d001502.pdf

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