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Safe Livestock Handling

My Great Grandmother used to say “*even a deadheaded old work plug can try to kill you on the wrong day*”. Most producers today aren’t working with that tried and true, loyal team of horses, but Grandma was right in the fact that you always have to be on guard while working around livestock. A healthy combination of understanding of animal behavior, patience and good facilities can go a long way in safety with livestock handling.

People working with farm animals can underestimate the strength and power that livestock have, fail to use common sense or livestock sense and expose themselves to injury. Studies have shown that about 20 percent of reported farm injury accidents involve livestock and there are many injuries that go unreported. Injuries many times occur when an animal is frightened.

The attitude and approach of the human can have major influence on the behavior of the animal. If you are frustrated or scared, animals can sense it and will act in response to your behavior. There is as much an art to working with livestock as there is science. Producers need to be able to ‘read’ animals and understand their behavior patterns and flight zones. Otherwise you might find yourself in a situation that you can’t get out of and could get hurt. If you stay calm, quiet and patient, then the livestock usually will too.

Today’s domesticated livestock evolved as prey animals and perceive humans as predators. When someone makes quick movements or loud noises, livestock may perceive the signals as a predatory strike. The last thing that a good handler wants to do is unknowingly send threatening signals to the animals. Handlers who can’t control their own temper, may deal with livestock tempers too! Understanding that their actions are most often a reaction to your behavior is paramount. I’ll save discussion of dogs for another day, but consider all handlers/observers who are around livestock.

Maintaining facilities is an important factor in injury prevention. Just like a person needs to understand animal behavior, they also need to understand how to properly utilize the facilities and equipment. Good facilities should be laid out to take advantage of animal behavior and sensory patterns, have solid sides to minimize distractions and be regularly maintained. They should have non-slip floors and be free of anything that can hurt animals such as nails, protruding bolts or wire. Sometimes working facilities that are not operating properly, are ill-designed, or are not maintained can cause handlers to lose their patience, livestock to balk, or create loud noises that frighten the animals.

Facilities not designed to allow animals to turn around and not go forward, create stress on the animals and handlers. Animals tend to be afraid of shadows on the ground or areas that go from light to dark, such as working facility entrances. If livestock aren’t moving properly, paddles and flags can be used to guide them in the right direction. Electric prods can be used as a last resort, but need to be used appropriately at the rear of the animal and only for a moment, then released.

Adequate working facilities are an essential component in a livestock operation. A study at Oklahoma State University found many injuries that occur while working cattle go unreported or unnoticed, unless a trip to the emergency room is necessary. Elements such as light, visibility of humans or animal movement, noise, etc may affect the ease at which livestock move through the working facility. The underlining objective of the handling facility is to move animals through the chutes in a safe, efficient manner with minimum stress on the animal and the handler.

For more information about animal handling and working facilities, interested person can reference the K-State Publication [MF2656 Livestock Safety](#) or call their local county or district K-State Research and Extension office.