

Know How To Handle Livestock

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — 'Tis the season for county fairs, 4-H events, and livestock shows of all kinds. This means farm animals will be handled and transported more than usual.

"There are correct and incorrect ways to handle livestock when transporting them, or when immobilizing them so you can work with them," said Dr. John Comerford, assistant professor of dairy and animal science in Penn State's College of Agriculture.

"When large animals are handled with knowledge and skill, they cooperate. There are many incidents where animals injure themselves or the people working with them. This is the result of poor facility design or people using poor judgement — it's not the animals' fault."

When handling livestock, it's important to understand how they perceive the world around them and react to certain stimuli.

Every animal has an area around it called the flight zone. Once an intruder — predator, human, or even motor vehicle — enters the flight zone, the animal tries to escape.

"As long as they don't see anything entering the flight zone, they won't try to run," said Comerford. "That's why people put blinders on horses and move cattle through chutes with solid sides. This blocks peripheral vision of the flight zone, and the animal is less likely to be distracted."

"An animal also will move forward more readily in a chute with solid sides. The solid sides make the animal feel confined, and it will instinctively move toward the daylight it sees ahead."

Livestock have poor depth perception and can be deceived by differences in light and dark. A shadow cast across a walkway appears to be a deep hole. Naturally, the animal refuses to walk across it.

Artificial lighting in chutes and walkways can remedy this.

Farm animals also have difficulty moving from dark places to brightly lighted places, and vice versa. If a horse balks at the entrance to a barn, it may be because all it sees is darkness ahead. When leaving a livestock truck, cattle may be dazzled by bright sunlight.

"When moving animals from one light situation to another, allow them time to adjust to the change," said Comerford. "Rushing them will cause them to balk. Animals walking through a properly constructed loading chute will naturally walk forward if they aren't hurried."

Livestock move instinctively in a circular pattern, not straight ahead. "As long as they see other animals walking along a curve in front of them, they will follow," said Comerford. "If other animals are lined up directly ahead of them, any intrusion into their flight zone from the rear will cause them to try to turn back in the direction they came from. Loading chutes and

walkways are more effective if built on a curve."

Comerford advises anyone owning livestock to have a restraining chute so animals can be handled at close range without risk of injury. The chute should be free of splinters, sharp edges, and exposed nails. The headlock at the front of the chute should be made of vertical bars to prevent choking or injury if the animal lies down or falls.

The chute should have solid sides to block the animal's peripheral vision and should be free of shadows and obstacles. "Even a rope hanging in front of an animal

will make it back away," said Comerford.

Restraining chutes should be no more than 32 inches wide for grown cattle. Loading chutes should be no more than 30 inches wide. For calves, loading and restraining chutes should be no more than 28 inches wide. This prevents the animals from turning around.

"A functional cattle-handling facility can be made out of wood for as low as \$300," said Comerford. "It's a lot less expensive than having an injured animal or person."



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