



Livestock Handling: Dairy and Beef Cattle and Sheep

Type of Stock

Beef Cattle

The social behaviour of cattle varies with age and breed. Beef cows are generally more flighty than dairy cows and tend to attack more frequently when with young calves. A good tip is to give cows time to unite with their calves before mustering. Mustering is best done in the cooler parts of the day and when visibility is good. Cattle are also better handled after a long grazing period and in small mobs so they behave as one and can be controlled at the same time.

Cattle are easier to handle once they have settled down after mustering and have time to become familiar with the yards. It is recommended that cattle be allowed to stand for 30 minutes before drafting.

Dairy Cattle

Many of the points about beef cattle also apply to dairy cattle. However, because of regular handling and routine, dairy cows display a lot of learned behaviour. If dairy cattle are disturbed by a change in routine, it raises their arousal and makes them difficult to handle. Dairy cattle are social animals and it is easier to take a cow out of the herd if she is accompanied by another cow. A newly-calved cow is not as dangerous in most cases as a beef cow, but on occasion will chase a dog or stockman.

Dairy bulls become more aggressive and territorial with age, particularly if they have been reared in isolation. Dairy bulls tend to be more dangerous than beef bulls with the Jersey breed being the most dangerous.

Never turn your back on bulls. Always treat them with respect.

Sheep

Sheep are generally not aggressive towards people, some rams, however, may butt humans in the breeding season. A sheep that is highly aroused may jump at a person in an attempt to rejoin its mob. Sheep are social animals and they like to be in constant contact with each other. Vision and

sound are important to sheep and any unpleasant stimuli which arouses these senses may cause sheep to mob. Because of their size, sheep do not usually hurt people, it is most often incorrect lifting techniques which causes harm to people.

Suitability of Yards

Always look at possible improvements to your existing yards and stock handling systems. People who are not aware of your stock handling procedures or stock yards may require additional information before starting work.

Principles of Cattle Yard Design

Footing

Yards should be surfaced with material that allows people and animals to move freely in all weathers. Metal or concrete surfaces are preferable.

Rails

Wooden rails are better than metal rails for handling because they are quieter and there is less space where animals may get legs caught. A top rail height of about 1525 mm has usually been found suitable in New Zealand.

Gates

Gates should move freely and have a stop to prevent them swinging right through the gap. Latches should shut firmly and easily; preferably self-closing so that the handler does not have to put their arms through gaps trying to hook a latch, risking crushing.

Reverse the top gudgeon so that the animal cannot lift the gate off its hinges.

Race, Crush and Head Bail

A race width of 660 mm clear space has generally been found satisfactory in New Zealand with some needing to be 710 mm for larger stock.

A race should be long enough to hold 4 to 8 adult cattle. Positioning of the head bail should give the appearance of a clear view to open space or other cattle beyond.

Forcing Pens

The design of the pen leading to the head bail, crush or loading ramp is important for good flow. It is best to have solid sides to the pen so that there are no visual distractions and the exit is the only escape route for stock. A curved forcing pen is used by some stockmen with the catwalk on the inside of the curve. The handler can then stay in the animals' vision and only has to move short distances.

A good working height for catwalks is about 610 mm above the ground which means about 915 mm from the top rail which is about waist height.

Cover catwalks with chicken wire to help improve grip.

Pens in General

Board up corners to eliminate cattle bunching, facing away from the handler. Narrow pens allow the handler to put pressure on the stock whereas stock tend to avoid the handler more easily in large pens. Ensure there are plenty of access ways and emergency escape gaps between and around pens.

Principles of Sheep Yard Design

Site

Sheep yard sites should ideally be level — sheep move faster on the level than uphill.

Shape

Circular yards are said to flow better than rectangular ones.

Long narrow pens restrict sheep from circulating allowing them to be caught more easily. The height of the top board varies from breed to breed but a range of heights between 875 mm and 1000 mm are considered adequate. Solid sides have an advantage in that sheep are not disturbed by the things outside the yards.

Races

Sheep move faster along straight wide races. Sides should be solid and widths vary from 1500 mm to 2500 mm for mob movement, 900 mm for crush races, for drafting 600 mm at the top tapering to 300 mm at 100 mm off the ground. Footing should provide good grip for the sheep and handler — a metal or concrete surface is preferable for this.

Gates

How easily and effectively gates open and close, greatly affects the efficiency of people in yards. Catches should be quick to open and close.

Stock Handling Methods

Beef and Dairy Cattle

Mustering

- Mustering is best done early in the morning or towards nightfall.
- Prepare the route in advance.
- Use flight distance to move cattle (flight distance is how close cattle let you come before they take flight).

- Cows and calves should be moved slowly. Avoid mustering beef cows with very young calves.

Drafting

- Draft quiet cattle from more excitable stock.
- It is easier to draft cattle from small mobs (up to 50).
- After drafting, make sure the two mobs can still see each other.

Sheep

Mustering

- Start early and work in the cool of the day.
- Plan your route.
- Smothering is a high risk when moving large mobs through narrow gaps, e.g. gateways, etc.
- Let sheep move at their own pace.
- Move a mob uphill through a gate where possible, rather than downhill.
- Position a person near the gate to cut off the flow, if smother risk builds up.
- Avoid downhill movement, particularly when it leads to a narrow gate or culvert.
- When driving a mob uphill to a gateway, ease back the pressure and give the sheep a chance to see ahead.

Drafting

Yard design has a tremendous effect on the efficiency with which animals can be handled. Yards should be designed to get sheep to flow readily and allow easy human access around the yards. To design the best yards you need to consider what the sheep sees, hears and smells as well as its innate behaviour. Reference to the titles mentioned below is recommended because of the wide and varied handling activities that can be undertaken with a smaller animal.

Have You Assessed the Critical Factors for Livestock Handling on the *Critical Factors Chart*?

- Type of stock
- Suitability of yards
- Stock handling methods.

References

Further information is contained in:

- Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992.
- *Guidelines for the Provision of Safety, Health and Accommodation in Agriculture*, available from OSH.
- *Farm Health and Safety Manual*, available from Federated Farmers.
- *Sheep and Cattle Handling Skills*, available from ACC.
- *Better Cattle Handling*, available from ACC
- *Better Yard Design*, available from ACC
- *Critical Factors Chart* available from OSH. (A guide for farmers to manage hazards in the workplace).