

Texas Dairy Matters

Higher Education Supporting the Industry

DAIRY CATTLE HANDLING FOR ANIMAL WELL-BEING

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Dairy producers face increasing scrutiny from the public for management and animal handling practices. Behavior detrimental to animal welfare is not condoned by the dairy industry; however the release of undercover videos by animal activists reminds the industry to review practices occurring on-farm. Producers must ensure proper animal treatment and handling is followed by all employees at all times.

The National Dairy FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) Program was established “to demonstrate and verify that U.S. milk producers are committed to providing the highest standards of animal care and quality assurance.” On-farm evaluations are conducted in multiple areas including: management; newborn calves; nutrition; animal health; environment and facilities; handling, movement and transportation; special needs animals; and dairy beef. This program also includes third-party verification to ensure the integrity of the program is upheld.

Each evaluation area is important; however for the purposes of this article, the focus will be on the animal handling aspect. Animal handling points to consider include:

- Move and speak in a calm, controlled, gentle manner when handling animals
- Move cattle at a walk
- Maintain routine contact with animals to retain familiarity
- Understand flight zones



- Ensure enough caretakers are available to perform the task appropriately
- Apply the least amount of force necessary while ensuring safety of herd mates and caretakers

There are additional points to consider when handling dairy cattle. Take into account the fact that they are prey animals and react with the fight or flight mentality when approached or forced aggressively into situations that are new or uncomfortable. Reacting in a fight or flight manner to uncomfortable situations increases the risk of injury to both the animal and the animal handler, especially when working in close quarters. The animal may slip and fall down or make contact with the animal handler. Not only are injuries possible, but the overall health of the animal may be impacted also. The stress hormones released may affect milk and meat quality as well as decrease the animal's ability to ward off disease due to a depressed immune system.

Regularly revisit animal handling protocols adopted by the dairy. Work through the protocols with employees, providing a refresher course on the proper techniques. Simultaneously review the protocols to determine if updates are necessary.

The implementation of the National FARM Program provides quality assurance throughout the dairy industry through consistent and uniform animal care. Consult with your veterinarian, nutritionist, and management team to establish best practices for animal care. Regular reviews of the protocols with dairy employees ensures that animal well-being is maintained while producing wholesome, healthy dairy products.

Resource

For additional information on the FARM program, visit the National Milk Producers Federation website at: <http://www.nmpf.org/publications/national-dairy-farm-program>.