

Cattle Business in Mississippi – October 2010
“Beef Production Strategies” article

Cattle Producer’s Role in Animal Welfare

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Animal welfare is the basis of sound animal husbandry. Beef cattle ranchers should consider themselves stewards of a valuable resource that provides high quality protein products to many people throughout the world. By engaging in beef cattle production, the producer agrees to an unwritten set of guidelines for ensuring that they provide the basic requirements to the cattle they own or manage. These basic requirements include: allowing daily access to ample feed and clean water, providing appropriate health care for preventing and/or treating disease or injury, and handling cattle in a manner that does not exert undue stress or hardship.

Offer cattle adequate space for comfort, socialization, and environmental management. Maintain pens appropriately, including harvesting manure, to improve pen conditions. Monitor mud accumulation on cattle as a measure of pen condition and cattle care in relation to weather conditions. Use dust reduction measures where needed to improve animal performance. Properly design and drain floors in animal housing facilities. Provide traction in barns and handling alleys to prevent injuries to animals and handlers. Keep handling alleys and housing pens free of sharp edges and protrusions to prevent injuries to animals and handlers.

Design and operate cattle handling facilities including alleys and gates to avoid obstructing cattle movement. Look for ways to reduce excessive noise when handling cattle to lessen any distress to them. Adjust restraining chutes and alleys to the appropriate size of cattle to be handled. Regularly clean and maintain handling and housing facilities to ensure proper function and safety for cattle and handlers.

The majority of cattle are transported during some point in their lives, and hauling is an integral part of most operations. Much of this transportation occurs as part of the marketing process or among pastures or other operational locations. Ensuring that proper transportation practices are used can reduce stress and prevent injury to the cattle. The *Master Cattle Transporter Guide* is an excellent reference on this topic and is available as part of the National Beef Quality Assurance Master Cattle Transporter training program.

Stress compromises cattle health and makes cattle handling more difficult. There are many potential sources of cattle stress including climate extremes, climate changes, disease, parasites, injuries, mud, noise, predators, poor nutrition, handling, calving, weaning, castration, dehorning, hauling, commingling, and isolation. Some of these factors are difficult to control or avoid, whereas others can largely be controlled by management. Minimize cattle stress with advance planning to best manage stress sources.

Examine cows with mild lameness, early eye problems, mastitis, or loss of body condition to determine well-being and any need for prompt marketing. Castrate and dehorn calves early in life. Vaccinate against respiratory diseases prior to weaning and based upon veterinary advice. Provide proper pre-weaning nutrition. Use low-stress weaning methods such as fenceline weaning.

Ensure that diets for all classes of beef cattle meet the National Research Council (NRC) recommendations and/or those of a qualified nutritional consultant. Provide cattle with access to adequate water and feed supplies, and avoid feed and water interruption longer than 24 hours. Make sure that feedstuffs are of satisfactory quality to meet nutritional needs. Use only feed products and additives that are USDA, FDA, and EPA approved for use in cattle. Use these products in accordance with the approved product use guidelines.

Euthanasia is humane death occurring without pain and suffering. Consider the animal's welfare in making euthanasia decisions. Reasons for euthanasia include: severe emaciation, weak cattle that are non-ambulatory or at risk of becoming downers; downer cattle that will not sit up, refuse to eat or drink, have not responded to therapy, and have been down for 24 hours or more; rapid deterioration of a medical condition for which therapies have been unsuccessful; severe, debilitating pain; compound (open) fracture; spinal injury; central nervous system disease; and multiple joint infections with chronic weight loss.

“Downer” cattle are non-ambulatory (unable to walk or move normally). Diagnose this condition promptly to make the best decisions on whether the animal should be humanely euthanized or receive additional care. Humanely euthanize cattle unable to sit up on their own and which refuse to eat or drink within 24 to 36 hours of initial onset. Do not send downer cattle to a livestock market or to a processing facility, even when signs of a more favorable prognosis may be present. Market cattle promptly before this issue occurs. This helps promote both a better quality of life for the animal and an economic benefit for the operation. For downers that are treated, be sure to provide adequate feed and water to non-ambulatory cattle at least once daily. Move downer animals very carefully to avoid compromising animal welfare using a sled, low-boy trailer, or in the bucket of a loader. Dragging cattle, lifting them with chains, or scooping them into loader buckets are all unacceptable.

Beef cattle producers are responsible for providing proper care to cattle. Beef Quality Assurance training is highly encouraged for all producers and industry participants as it is a combination of technology, common sense, a concern for animal well-being, and a consumer oriented production system. It reflects a positive public image and instills consumer confidence in the beef industry in a time of increased public attention on animal welfare. The Beef Quality Assurance Code of Cattle Care includes general recommendations for care and handling of cattle. All cattle handlers and caregivers should follow the Producer Code of Cattle Care as outlined in *The Cattle Industry's Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Cattle*.

- “Provide necessary food, water, and care to protect the health and well-being of animals.
- Provide disease prevention practices to protect herd health, including access to veterinary care.
- Provide facilities that allow safe, humane, and efficient movement and/or restraint of cattle.
- Use appropriate methods to humanely euthanize terminally sick or injured livestock and dispose of them properly.
- Provide personnel with training/experience to properly handle and care for cattle.
- Make timely observations of cattle to ensure basic needs are being met.
- Minimize stress when transporting cattle.
- Keep updated on advancements and changes in the industry to make decisions based upon sound production practices and consideration for animal well-being.
- Persons who willfully mistreat animals will not be tolerated.”

Assess management practices daily to ensure that animal welfare is not compromised. Conduct self reviews periodically that include all persons involved with cattle handling and care. Ensure that employees and all others involved in the cattle operation receive proper instruction, training, and oversight.

Implement management programs built on science and common sense. Sound animal husbandry practices are based on decades of research and practical experience. They impact the well-being, health, and productivity of cattle. It makes both economic and moral sense to use these sound practices throughout the beef cattle industry. By following these very basic, yet extremely important, guiding principles (as outlined in the National and Mississippi Beef Quality Assurance Programs), reasonable production levels can be maintained and the public perception of beef cattle production should remain favorable. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.