

DAIReXNET Webinar Review: The Importance of Good Handling Skills for Dairy Cows



By: Donna Amaral-Phillips, Ph.D.

Animal handling practices impact animal welfare and performance of dairy cattle. Cattle retain memories of their experiences and can remember handlers that use either positive or negative handling practices. Dr. Katy Proudfoot from the Ohio State University presented a webinar on this topic and some of the scientific experiments used to test how a cow's memory impacts cow behavior. For those who would like to view this webinar, it can be viewed from the DAIReXNET website under the heading of archived webinars (www.extension.org/dairy+cattle). The following is a summary of her discussion.

1. Positive handling behavior, including gentle touching and stroking, soft talking and slow movements, by human caretakers can decrease fear in cows and improve milk production. Negative human behaviors include slapping, pushing, hitting with objects, and loud yelling. These behaviors elicit an increase in fear, decrease in milk production and conception rates, and increased flight zones. Measuring the flight zone or how quickly cows move away from humans, can provide an indication of their fearfulness.
2. Cattle have better hearing than humans and shouting has a negative effect on cattle. Dr. Proudfoot discussed one study which showed a similar response when cows received a loud shout or an electric prod. Observing (i.e., no hitting of cows or unnecessary use of prods) and listening (no yelling) to cow handlers as they work is a critical skill for farm managers to detect potential cattle handling issues.
3. Handlers should be trained to move cattle using low stress handling techniques where the flight zone and point of balance are used to their advantage when moving cattle. Essentially, the point of balance is the shoulder area of the cow. When a handler is behind the point of balance, cows will move forward. With eyes on the side of the head, cattle also have poor depth perception. Essentially, they have a blind spot directly behind and in front of them.
4. Studies show that dairy cows remember those that treat them negatively even during times they do not display the negative behavior toward these dairy cows. Additional studies have shown that cows recognize people by a combination of features including their face and height and weight.