

Safe Handling of Cattle on Farms – How Safe are You

November 2010

This information sheet gives advice on the safe handling of cattle on farms. Dangerous situations involving cattle are almost entirely avoidable – you or a family member needn't become a “statistic”.



Golden Rules in Handling Cattle

ALWAYS

- ✓ Work out an escape route or refuge area in advance of working with cattle.
- ✓ Know and understand the basics of cattle behaviour.
- ✓ Make sure persons handling cattle are competent and agile.
- ✓ Use bulls that produce docile offspring.
- ✓ Maximise the use of Artificial Insemination.
- ✓ Be careful around cows that are calving or with new born calves as they are more likely to attack.
- ✓ Remember that cows that are 'on-heat' are unpredictable.
- ✓ Try to keep cattle calm when handling them.
- ✓ Use a stick or paddle to assist in directing cattle.
- ✓ Debud calves early to prevent horn growth.
- ✓ Watch for warning signs of animal aggressiveness and cull fractious and difficult cattle.
- ✓ Exercise caution when administering veterinary treatments.
- ✓ Protect yourself against biohazards with proper personal hygiene.
- ✓ Wear suitable protective clothing and footwear.
- ✓ Use well designed facilities (an investment in your safety).
- ✓ Regularly check and maintain facilities such as the crush, gate latches and fences.
- ✓ Keep ground surfaces clean and clear of trip hazards, as far as possible.

NEVER

- ✘ Put an inexperienced handler, elderly person or a child at risk with cattle.
- ✘ Handle cattle or get others to handle them if there is a lack of competence and confidence to do the work safely.
- ✘ Turn your back on a bull or trust a bull, no matter how docile he may appear.
- ✘ Stress /arouse cattle unnecessarily.
- ✘ Turn your back on a cow at calving.
- ✘ Keep dangerous cattle.
- ✘ Suddenly enter the animal's 'Blind Spot'.
- ✘ Rush into the animal's 'Flight Zone'.
- ✘ Beat or shout at cattle unnecessarily – they remember bad experiences.
- ✘ Move cattle on a public road at night.

Good Handling Facilities and Equipment

Well designed and maintained handling facilities are essential for the safe handling of cattle and prevention of injury to handlers. Many accidents involving cattle could be eliminated with better handling facilities.

**Keep the Yard Clean and Tidy**

A lot of accidents on farms result from simple trips, slips and falls. It is essential that handling areas should be kept clean and tidy.



The layout and design must be appropriate to your needs for safe handling

Fences and Gates

The fences and gates on the farm must be able to contain the classes of cattle on the farm. In particular, all road boundaries must be stock proof and internal fences able to ensure that unplanned mixing does not occur.

Cattle Winter Housing

There must be enough space and shelter for the number, size and class of cattle being held. The animal welfare regulations specify the minimum area requirements. Cattle of broadly similar age and size should be penned together where possible.



Bull Housing

A well designed bull pen is essential to the proper management of the bull(s) when he is away from the herd. The bull pen should be located so that the bull(s) can see other cattle and daily farm activity in the farmyard. The structure must be strong and high enough to stop them escaping.

Calving Facilities

The calving area should provide adequate space, be tidy, well-bedded with clean dry straw, free of obstructions with good lighting. Well designed calving pens and gates minimise the direct physical contact between the cow/heifer and the farmer. Calving jacks, if properly used, can reduce the risk of back injuries.



Dairy Cattle in the Milking Parlour

There is always close contact in the milking parlour between 'the milkers' and the cows. The design of the parlour and the yard must ensure that cows are able to be milked safely and rapidly. It is most important that cows have adequate room in the milking parlour and that the Kick Rail is at the correct height to prevent the 'milker' getting kicked. All milking parlours must be well earthed and, if necessary, checks made to measure any stray electrical current in the pipe work or coming through the milking machines.

Suckler and Finishing Cattle Housing

Suckler and Finishing cattle have less human contact than milking cows and hence are more likely to cause problems, especially with strangers. This is especially the case on many part-time farms where the only real human contact may occur at the weekend. The quality of the housing facility to enable safe handling is no less important on small 'part-time' farms than on full-scale economic units.

Dangers with Loading and Unloading

A suitable loading ramp is essential for safe loading of trailers or trucks. Cattle escaping to the sides at this time can create a huge problem.

A good facility that matches the trailer/truck is essential.

Any steps for the cattle must be less than 20cm high and the ramp angle less than 15 degrees.

Non-slip surfaces are important and in some instances straw or hay should be spread on the loading ramp.

When loading take due care closing up the ramp gates, a lot of accidents occur when closing the gates as cattle can kick back or push back on top of the handler, always stand to the side when lifting the ramp and seek assistance where ever possible so as to avoid back injury.

When the ramp is lowered to unload, step well to the side in case a stampede occurs. Be patient and don't rush them as they will always want to leave the trailer.



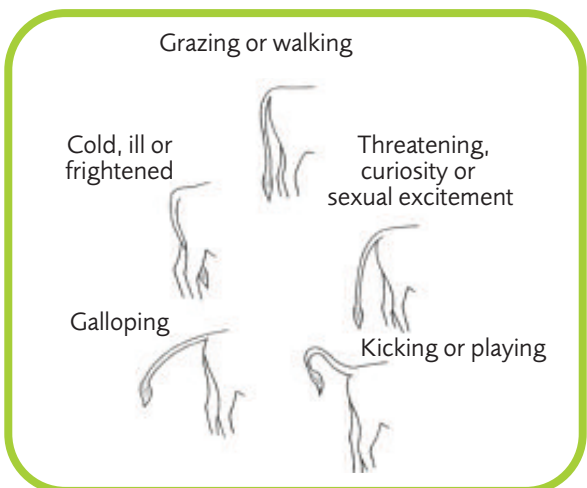
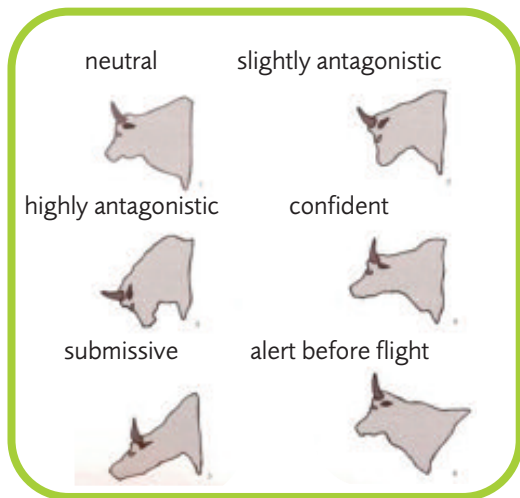
Position the trailer to avoid gaps like this



Handling Different types of Cattle

Watch for Danger signs Cattle that are known to be fractious or unpredictable will pose an even greater risk. The demeanour of cattle usually tells of their state of arousal. This can be in the form of the head and tail positions, pawing the ground with its legs, or bellowing. Seriously distressed cattle often bellow loudly – a sure sign to the farmer to be especially careful and to its herd-mates that there is danger.

The diagrams below show typical head and tail positions :



Watch out for:

- Head and Tail Positions
- Bellowing
- All Bulls
- All Cows with calves at foot
- All highly aroused or aggressive cattle
- Horned cattle



Bulls

Bulls cause over 50% of livestock related deaths on Irish farms.

Never turn your back on a bull as all bulls are potential killers, even seemingly quiet bulls. Farmers and persons handling bulls must treat them with caution and respect at all times.

Persons handling bulls should be fit and agile and be aged between 18 and 65 years.

The risk of attack from stock bulls running with the herd is greatest during the summer months.





Avoid grazing a bull in a field where there is a right of way or where members of the public may have access.

Never walk through an open field with a bull, walk along ditches where you can escape or bring a refuge such as a tractor or jeep.

If moving a bull between fields, yards or housing plan the work carefully to minimise stress and potential attack.

Cows

Cows and heifers are more unpredictable during stressful periods such as calving, weaning and at their first milking.

Suckler cows which are handled less frequently generally pose a greater risk than dairy cows.

Cows are very protective of their calves. Several farmers have been killed by cows during or immediately after calving.



Never turn your back on cows with new born calves. She may perceive you as a threat and attack. A freshly calved heifer may present an even greater threat.

Other Cattle

Other classes of cattle such as heifers, bullocks, bull beef and young stock can also be dangerous.

Several aspects of cattle husbandry such as housing of animals during the winter, castration, scanning, freeze branding, drenching, vaccination, dehorning and transportation have the potential to cause serious injury if not managed correctly.

Some tasks will involve getting into the cattle crush with the animal where the following basic rules should be followed:

- Only allow one animal at a time into the crush.
- Restrain the animal's head in the crush gate.
- A second person should hold the tail straight up.
- Have a slip gate into the crush just behind the first animal.
- Have a suitable system for holding the scanner or other equipment.
- Have a person to restrain the animal's nose when castrating.



Particular care is also required when separating or moving cattle and when crossing roads with cattle.

How good are your skills?

Persons handling cattle must be competent, fit and agile. They should practice good personal hygiene and wear appropriate personal protective equipment (e.g. steel toecap boots). High – viz jackets or vests are essential if moving cattle on or across roads.

Good stockmanship skills are essential. This will ensure the cattle are not stressed and will reduce the risk of injury to the handler.

Provide suitable training and adequate supervision to young and inexperienced persons working with cattle.

Very young children are at risk if around cattle and should never be allowed to enter yards or fields with livestock unless with an adult.

Older farmers are also at greater risk due to reduced mobility, being less agile and maybe being complacent.

Further Information:

- The Health and Safety Authority's web site www.hsa.ie.
- Contact the Health and Safety Authority at wcu@hsa.ie or LoCall **1890 289 389**.

Plan for Emergencies

- Keep the mobile phone in your pocket so you can call for help, if needed.
- Someone else should know where you are and when you expect to return.
- Keep a First Aid box in your vehicle or shed, with supplies of plasters, bandages and disinfectant to treat minor cuts and grazes.
- Keep feed reserves readily available in case temporary staff need to tend your cattle at short notice.
- Ensure you have Public Liability Insurance in place and that it covers transport of cattle on the road.

Published in 2010 by the Health and Safety Authority, The Metropolitan Building, James Joyce Street, Dublin 1.

Acknowledgement : The New Zealand Accident Compensation Corporation Ltd for use of diagrams from Bulletin 517,2002.

