

## Working Safely Around Dairy Cattle

The very nature of operations on the dairy involves directly working with and around cattle. Milking cows, calving, treating sick animals, routine health care, feeding and moving animals are some of the activities that take place each day in running a dairy. Working around cattle can be hazardous. On dairies, some of the most serious injuries or even deaths are a result of being kicked, struck or crushed by a cow or bull. Taking a few important precautions and learning how to work safely around animals can help reduce exposures to incidents involving cattle.

### CATTLE

#### Animal behavior

Dairy cows are considered to be gentle animals, at times they have a nervous disposition and can be unpredictable. Sudden changes, abrupt movements or loud noises can cause an animal to react. Incidents often occur when a cow is startled and the result is a person getting kicked, trampled or crushed. It is important to respect the cows and apply good safety practices to prevent injury. All employees need to be trained on safe animal handling and how to properly use animal handling equipment.

#### Flight Zone & Point of Balance

Dairy cattle have what is referred to as a flight zone, or comfort zone and a point of balance. Understanding these points will help handlers move animals more easily and will reduce frightening them. By following some important guidelines and training employees on the flight zone and points of balance, cows will be encouraged to move in a calm manner which will minimize panic and help reduce the risk of injury to the handler.

- The flight zone is the distance where a person can comfortably approach a cow and they do not feel threatened. Once this flight zone boundary is

broken, the dairy cow may become nervous or agitated and therefore possibly dangerous. The flight zone can be anywhere from 5 to 25 feet for tame cattle and further for wild cattle.

- The point of balance is at the shoulder of the animal. If a handler stands behind the point of balance and approaches the flight zone, the animal will typically move forward. If the handler stands in front of the point of balance and moves towards the animal, they should typically move backward.

#### Cattle Vision

Knowing how a cow sees is important when working around cattle.

- Cattle have panoramic vision which allows them to see 300 degrees around them.
- The only blind spot is directly behind the cow.
- Avoid approaching a cow from behind so you do not startle them. A cow that is startled may kick out.
- You should approach cattle from the shoulder.

#### Bulls

Dairy bulls tend to be more aggressive animals. Bull attacks have led to severe injuries and even deaths on dairy farms. Many dairies use artificial insemination to reduce employee's exposure to bulls. While the use of artificial insemination may be more expensive, the cost of one injury (or even death) can easily outweigh the benefits of having dairy bulls in your operation.

If your operation has dairy bulls, you must take extreme caution and preparation when working with these animals.

- Dairies should have a facility designed so that a bull can be fed, watered, maintained, and used for breeding with employees having minimal direct contact with the animal.
- Dairy bulls are very unpredictable and can change mood at a moments notice.
- It is important to know the location of the bulls in your operation and post warning signs in areas where bulls are kept.
- Access to bull pens should be limited to experienced handlers only.
- Minimize bull handling by keeping bulls in a separate corral and bringing cows to them.
- Bulls should be removed by the age of three years or at the first signs of aggression so they can be removed.
- Employees should be trained to report aggressive bulls immediately to their supervisor.

## DAIRY OPERATIONS

### Moving and Separating Cattle

Cows are moved to and from the dairy parlor daily. Typically once cows learn where they are going they move without issue. Animal injuries may occur while moving cattle such as being stepped on by a cow, pinned between a cow and an object, or kicked.

- When moving cows, it is important to not get caught in the middle of the herd.
- Avoid situations where you may be pinned between a structure and a cow causing you to be crushed. Keeping a safe distance between you and the cow is important.
- Always plan an escape route.
- Move quietly around the cattle and avoid quick abrupt movements. Never treat the cows in an aggressive or mean behavior. This will make it more difficult to deal with them in the future.

- Cattle are herd animals and their instinct is to rejoin the herd if they get separated.
- If it is necessary to separate a cow from the herd, use a system of gates and chutes.
- Avoid jumping or stepping in front of a cow that is running to get back to the herd to prevent getting trampled or stepped on.

### Milking Parlor

Handling cattle gently from the beginning will make milking easier and safer in the future. Watch for cows that are agitated and take extra precaution when hooking them up to the milking machine. Take extra care with cows that are being milked for the first time.

Kicking is one of the most common injuries involving cattle in the milking parlor. Cows will kick forward and out to the side. Ensure employees stay out of or away from this danger zone to prevent injuries. In addition to employees being kicked, incidents involving employee's arms and hands being stepped on often occur. Pay close attention to the cow's movements when hooking up milking machines.

### Hospital – Doctoring Cattle

On the dairy, it is often necessary to doctor cows. A cow that is ill or that has been injured may have erratic behavior. When working with cows that may not feel well, it is important to take extra care in being alert to an animal's behavior. Ensure employees are communicating with each other regarding which animals are sick or injured so that extra precaution can be taken when working with these animals. The use of a chute and "headgate" may be used to prevent injuries while doctoring cattle.

### Hospital – Calving

Cows with new calves are very protective of their offspring. Ensure that the calves are kept close to their mother so you do not stress the animal and prevent injury. Be aware of some cows' potential to be aggressive and protective just after they have given birth.

## ANIMAL HANDLING EQUIPMENT, FACILITIES AND THE USE OF PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

Equipment and design of operation are important to safety on the dairy. Personal protective equipment may be needed for some activities.

- For some activities such as doctoring, hoof trimming, ear tagging, artificial insemination (AI), and dehorning, animal handling equipment may be necessary to restrain the animal to prevent injuries to both the animal and the handler. Proper use of a squeeze chute, hoof trimming chute, stanchion or rope halter are important safety measures when handling cattle.
- Equipment should be in good working order and employees should be trained on how to properly use equipment.
- Never stand directly in front of or behind the chute when moving cattle in and out.
- Ensure the floors are kept clean around this equipment so employees (and animals) don't slip. Floors should be cleaned after every use.
- Textured floors are another way to reduce kicking. Textured floors prevent the animal from slipping therefore reducing incidental kicks that may injure an employee.
- Installing "mangates" or pass throughs can assist with employee safety. Mangates are a passage way consisting of 2 posts about 14 inches apart inside the pen that employees can easily escape confrontation with cattle instead of trying to open a gate or jump a fence.
- Various personal protective equipment such as safety glasses, gloves, long pants, boots, steel-toed work shoes and a bump cap may be needed for some activities.

## ZOONOTICS

The term zoonotics refers to infectious diseases in animals that can be transmitted to humans. For operations involving work with and around animals, zoonotic disease prevention must be addressed. A program should have commitment from management and include the following key elements.

- Effective zoonotic hazard recognition, prevention and control measures which also includes sanitation practices; proper use and selection of personal protective equipment; and a system for veterinary referral.
- Safety and health training that specifically addresses prevention, identification, transmission, and reporting of potential zoonotic diseases.
- Investigation and surveillance procedures of potential zoonotic diseases.
- Proper biosecurity measures/procedures.
- Recordkeeping procedures.

## SUMMARY

Cattle are unpredictable and employees must be constantly aware of the animals they are working with and around. Training and identifying hazards when working with cattle is critical. Understanding animal behavior and knowing the steps to take to keep the animal and employee safe is central to the safety program of any dairy operation.

For additional information or assistance, contact your Zenith Safety and Health consultant.