Recognizing and Reducing Stress in Feedlot Cattle

We all want and need to have healthy cattle with peak productivity but how often have you had cattle that did not gain as quickly as they should or you needed to treat more sick animals than usual?
What you have probably witnessed are the **cardinal signs of stress:**
♦ reduced feed intake
♦ increased sickness and disease
♦ poorly groomed/lethargic appearance

Most of the factors that cause stress in livestock are a direct result of our management practices. The key to ensuring good weight gains and low drug costs is in the recognition and reduction of the causes of stress.

Upon Arrival at the Feedlot

Newly arrived cattle are often tired, hungry, thirsty and scared.

TRANSPORT

The stress of transport (long distances, fasting) is added onto other factors such as mixing with unfamiliar animals and novelty of the new environment. Many studies have shown that the distance of transport, and the amount of mixing can greatly affect animal production.

Fasting between 12 and 24 hours during transport causes live weight losses between 12 and 14%.

GET CALVES UP, DRINKING AND EATING ASAP

- Water – make it accessible and easy to find
  - Jam the float in the water bowl for the first day to attract cattle
  - Move a portable water trough to the calves.
- Hay - palatable high quality hay
  - half grass: half alfalfa
  - AVOID: pure alfalfa, moldy, or heat damaged hay
- Grain - gradually introduce within 2-3 days after the calves arrive to provide them with extra energy.
  - Silage can be introduced after 3-4 days by mixing it with chopped hay until the calves get used to the taste of the silage.

Feeder Space
Cattle will synchronize their feeding. Bunk space should be large enough to allow cattle to eat at the same time.

KEEP ANIMALS IN THEIR ORIGINAL GROUPS

The amount of mixing (fewer calves from many farms) at the auction market has been linked to increased mortality within the first two weeks of arrival to the feedlot. At the auction, try to buy groups of calves from the same farm when possible as it will: ♦reduce the stress of unfamiliarity ♦the potential mixing of healthy and sick stock ♦reduce aggression and riding

Routine Management Procedures

Cattle might arrive at the feedlot that have not yet been processed (e.g. vaccination, dehorning, branding, ear tagging, castration). Many of these procedures are known to cause short-term discomfort and subsequent setback in cattle performance.

- **Pain control is required for:**
  - Castrating bulls > 6 months
  - Dehorning

Consult your veterinarian for advice on what to use for pain control.

- Stress caused by routine procedures can be further limited by:
  - Timing - process 1 to 2 days after arrival but once settled, allowing time for compensatory gain before slaughter
  - Conduct quickly and cleanly - restrain to avoid additional time or injury
  - Management - experienced workers who are familiar with proper technique

It is advisable to talk to your suppliers to have cattle processed on-farm, as scientific evidence shows this improves growth rate and decreases stress

Handling

WORK ANIMALS SLOWLY AND GENTLY

AVOID – the use of whips, electric prods, running, yelling, or jumping to get animals to move

Calm handling promotes calm, stress-free animals.

Non-ambulatory cattle/downers

- must be examined,
- should never be dragged from the vehicle while conscious,
- and if it is determined that they are unlikely to recover they should be euthanized on spot.

FACILITY DESIGN

Should promote animal movement and reduce fear.

- Chutes with solid sides - reduce fear and balking
- Curved chutes - promote the natural circling movement of cattle

EXERCISE

Getting lying animals up and moving around during daily pen checking may improve performance in calves.

- Easier to detect poor doers
- Get calves up to the feeder

Moving animals = getting them up and calmly milling around

NOT chasing them from one end of the pen to the other, causing more stress.

Environmental Factors

- Extreme heat and cold - Provide appropriate environmental modifications
- Manure build up - ensure that corrals are clean and access to feed and water is not hindered
- Non-slip flooring
- Natural predators (untrained farm dogs and coyotes) - limit contact
- Insects - provide access to cattle oilers or place ear tags with insecticide
- Noise – reduce loud machinery use