



Friend or Foe? Dairy Cattle Safety

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Lucy. That is a name I will never forget. Lucy was an Ayrshire that was purchased by my brother when some friends of ours had a herd dispersal. Lucy was a miserable #\$\$%*!, but only to me. In the heifer barn she would find me and chase me, she sent me into a wall, a gate and over

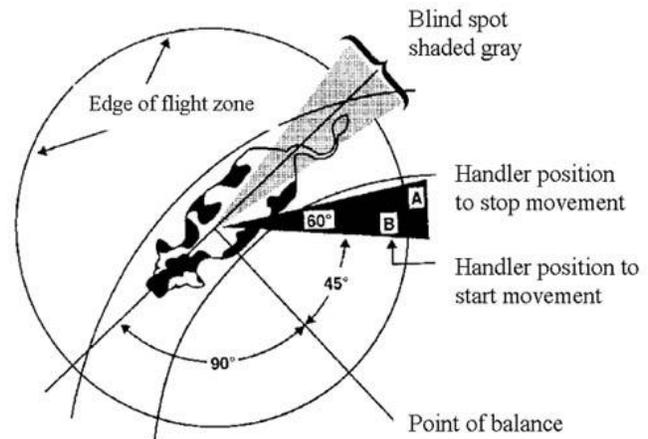
a fence (I might have been 12 at the time). Nobody thought it was a problem, because she was nice to everyone else. Once she entered the milking herd she continued to be of great nature (to everyone, but me). She sent me out a barn window and I got really quick going over gates. I refused to go into the low pen without anyone else. My brothers thought I was crazy. She was such a sweet cow they would tell me. One day she decided to go after my older brother, and she was on the next load of cattle to the sale barn. I celebrated by getting a cheeseburger at McDonalds.

Why am I telling you about Lucy, because every farm has a Lucy. We all have a cow that we know doesn't like a certain person, or women, or men, or children, or the right side of the parlor, or fresh heifers, or older cows... Every "Lucy" present a safety issue. While we might send "Lucy" down the road after a near miss, we need to be aware that another "Lucy" is in the herd waiting her turn in the pecking order. Some cows may be very calm most days, but become a "Lucy" when in heat, after calving, in confined spaces or while restrained. Working with cattle can be dangerous and we need to be aware of our surroundings, and animal behavior.

There are some important generalizations we can make about cattle that facilitate their handling:

- Excited animals are harder to handle. If cattle become nervous or excited when being worked, stop and allow the animal 30 minutes for their heart rates to return to normal. Many of us work in a fast paced environment, not allowing cattle to settle down can lead to injuries for both the animal and employee. An extra 30 minutes is an investment in animal and employee safety.
- Cattle are generally color blind and have poor depth perception, thus they are very sensitive to contrast. Eliminate blind turns, dark shadows and swinging/ dangling items in their path to enable easier movement.
- Loud noises, especially high pitched noises, frighten cattle. When cattle are moved quietly they remain more calm and easier to handle.
- Cattle remember "bad" experiences and create associations from fear memories. For example, if a man with a beard caused a cow pain, she may exhibit fear towards all men with beards. This makes calm and respectful handling at all times even more important.
- Cows that have just given birth are much more dangerous to handle and employees should be aware of the risks and trained to deal with these animals appropriately.
 - Know your escape route. Have a plan for exiting in case of an emergency before entering a pen with a new mother.
 - Separate the calf from the heifer or cow quickly, before she has a chance to bond with her calf. This will not only make separation less dangerous, it will also be less stressful for the animals.
 - It may be safer to remove the cow from the calf rather than try to take the calf away from the cow.

When handling cattle it's important to understand their flight zone. A flight zone refers to a cow's "personal space." When a human enters her flight zone she will move, just as when a human leaves her flight zone she will stop moving. The size of the flight zone varies depending on the tameness of the cow and can range from 5 to 25 feet for the average dairy cow. A cow also has a "pivot point" or a "point of balance" at her shoulder. The cow will move backward or turn if the handler crosses the pivot point towards her head. Conversely, the cow will move forward if the handler crosses the pivot point approaching her hindquarters.



Cows in a group can be encouraged to move forward if the handler walks slowly past the pivot point on their shoulders, steadily approaching the back of the herd. Additionally, cows have a blind spot directly behind them. Handlers should never approach from directly behind a cow as she may become nervous and kick.

In addition to boss cows, or feisty heifers, many farms still utilize a "clean-up bull". Dairy bulls present additional safety considerations. If you have bulls on your farm, or work with farmers that have bulls it is important to be able to identify signs of aggression and know how to respond to a threat.

If you are going to have bulls on your operation, or currently have a bull you need to

- Design or modify bull holding facilities so bulls may be fed, watered, and used for breeding with employees having minimal direct contact.
- Create man gates, or 14" wide openings in pens with a bull or individual bull enclosures for employees to exit without climbing a fence or opening a gate in case of an emergency.
- Post warning signs on pens that contain a bull to caution employees and visitors of the bull's presence.
- Train employees to report aggressive behavior immediately.
 - Signs of aggression may include: Turning broadside with his back arched, head lowering or shaking, flexing of neck, protruding eyeballs, hair along back standing at end.
- Cull bulls that show any signs of aggression or that reach over 2 years in age, as they become unpredictable.
- Never work bulls alone or allow an employee to work a bull alone. Plan an escape route before beginning work



Often times it takes a farm accident (either our own or at our neighbor) to remind us of animal safety. We get comfortable and take for granted the docile 1500 pound animals that provide us with a lively hood.