



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section

791

Low-Stress Livestock Handling on Pasture and Range

Roger Ingram, University of California
Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor

Stress is one of the great hidden costs in the livestock industry. Handling stress affects ranching operations through marketing, weight gain, reproduction, health, and relationships with family and labor. The good news is that making changes in our attitudes toward handling livestock can lead to benefits economically and relationally without any associated capital or direct costs. Cattle producers just have to be willing to invest their time to learn.

The principles and techniques of low-stress livestock handling were developed by Bud Williams, the world's leading expert on livestock handling. These techniques have been used in all kinds of terrain and climates and on all kinds of livestock, elk, reindeer, and fallow deer.

Using these methods, cattle producers learn to work animals in such a way that cattle do not consider handlers a threat to them. The last thing handlers want is for animals to think their handler is a predator. The goal is not only to work livestock with very little stress but also to take existing stress off of them.

This paper is the author's interpretation of these principles and techniques and is based on personal experiences with Bud Williams that occurred during a 2-month study leave. These methods work and result in stress reduction in cattle including lowered death loss, reduced sickness, and improved weight gains.

The following information provides a basic introduction to low-stress livestock handling and is not meant as an all encompassing guide. Resources listed at the end can provide additional information through schools, videos, and written materials.

In order to implement low-stress livestock handling techniques, cattle producers must make two main changes in attitude:

Old Attitude: I'm going to MAKE that animal do what I want.

New Attitude: I'm going to LET that animal do what I want.

Old Attitude: That miserable (ornery, wild, stupid, hateful . . .) cow (calf, bull, sheep, pig, horse . . .) broke back (went the wrong way, missed the gate, charged me, got sick . . .).

New Attitude: What did I do to cause the animal to react that way?

Once the attitudes of cattle producers have changed, three steps will assist handlers to see changes in the way they interact with livestock (Cote 1999). These are:

1. **Stop forcing stock to do what cattle handlers want.** Replace the use of force with training controlled by low stress principles. Add some practice and patience to the mix, and livestock will begin to understand producers are not going to force them.
2. **Stop doing the things that bother livestock.** This allows them to get comfortable and learn quickly.
3. **Correctly use handling techniques.** Livestock will respond naturally to them and will do the things cattle handlers want.

Low-stress livestock handling means the animal does not see the handler as a predator forcing them to move. This is replaced by using actions (pressure) that allow cattle handlers to get a desired response without force. Once handlers get that desired response, the coaxing action is stopped (release). When livestock see that human application of pressure is always accompanied by release of pressure when the animal responds, the cattle relax and comply with what handlers want.

In order to be effective in not forcing animals, cattle handlers must understand some basics about animal behavior. To understand basics, handlers must first observe livestock tendencies.