

# LIVESTOCK HANDLING DURING DISASTERS

## UNDERSTANDING LIVESTOCK HANDLING

Research and years of handling technique application have demonstrated that understanding the behavioral preferences of livestock including their social interaction, flight zones and various seasonal or environmental stimuli can aid livestock managers in conducting low-stress movement of animals.

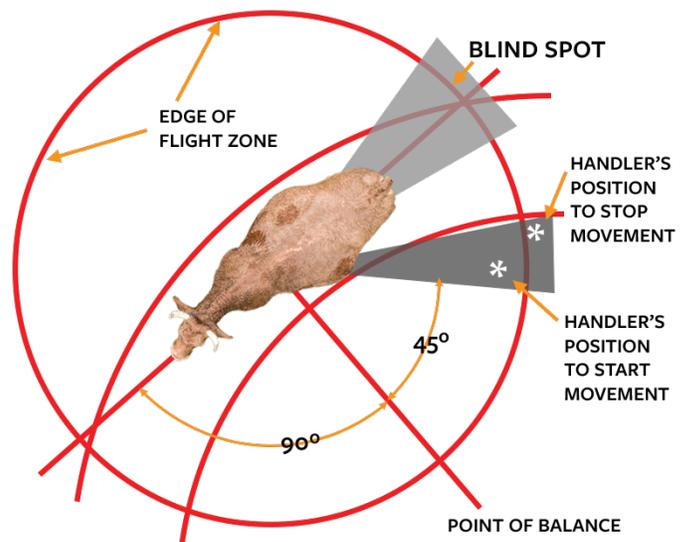
Understand the gregarious herd mentality has allowed workers to move animals toward other animals in a manner which places them efficiently. This technique was utilized in historic trail drives by recognizing and cultivating a lead cow which the others would follow down the trail in an appropriate direction. The same research has also refined understanding to the herd and social cues demonstrated by livestock in normal situations. A good example is quietly approaching a herd of grazing cattle and once you see one animal go heads up you slow, stop or try to become non-threatening.

Many animals get stressed, nervous or excited when they are exposed to unfamiliar sounds, smells, animals, humans, incidents or occurrences. Their behavior becomes more pronounced when exposed to such elements. By understanding each species behavioral pattern and flight or fight zones we can use gentle pressure to move them in a desired direction.

## ANIMAL HANDLING DURING DISASTERS

Many workers understand the dynamics of handling and moving different species, but if you add in herd tension caused by high water, air and ground vibrations, smoke, loud sounds, blood, debris, animal/human panic and a wide number of other confusing situations most animal species will react in any way but normal.

Traditional animal owners and handlers will often find themselves dealing with animals which they know well but are acting erratically. Do some homework and when a disaster or emergency happens take measures in advance (mitigation) to reduce natural panic and confusion by animals.



Learn to recognize a heads up alerted posture in your livestock. It usually indicates the animals are already nervous and will react in a nervous manner.

Each year make a plan on what and how you may have to move, feed or handle each species. This should include a review of what ability you have to haul livestock, drive livestock or defend them in place. Livestock and poultry tend to become extremely gregarious (herd inclined) when nervous.

Never work livestock alone during emergencies or disasters. Since animals may react with aggression toward handlers, make sure you have backup. Provide an extra margin of flight zone during disasters.

Remember, much of the infrastructure you normally depend on may be compromised.

## **SOME DISASTER SPECIFIC LIVESTOCK REALITIES**

In the 25+ years of Extension working with livestock during disasters, a number of realities have been documented that can help frame a handling plan.

### **BLIZZARDS**

During blizzards cattle and sheep tend to move downwind away from the snow until they can move no farther or find a place



out of the wind. They then tend to bunch up and occasionally lay down to reduce their profile. If the sheltered spot is low and captures snow it can end up blowing over the livestock and kill some. If the low spot is a watershed, serving as a municipal water source, this can generate additional issues. Horses tend to move upwind until they can go no farther and then turn their rear ends to the storm. If they are in a shelter, this works, if not they can suffer extreme exposure.

### **FLOODING**

During flooding a variety of reactions can occur. All animals will tend to move uphill even if it traps them against a fence line or structure. Rapid moving flood water can disrupt normal movement patterns and generate panicked efforts by livestock to find high ground. Large wide-spread flooding can confuse livestock somewhat in knowing which direction to move. Animals with young will normally be hesitant to move fast due to limitations of the young. Water depth and speed can be serious challenges for calves, foals and lambs. Sheep and lambs can also increase their body weight by almost 80 percent when wet contributing to rapid fatigue and limited ability to react. Even if handlers know the need is to go in a direction other than uphill, livestock will actively resist. Keep wire pliers handy in all boats and vehicles.

### **TORNADOES**

Livestock are almost always confused by the sound, vibrations and winds of tornadoes. They will move away from the winds which hit them. They may move the opposite direction as the twister passes.

### **WILDFIRES**

Livestock rapidly pickup on the smoke and airborne chemicals emitted by wildfires and move away from them as rapidly as possible. As fires get closer, horses, cattle and sheep tend to get panicky and confused when smoke is in their noses and starts to obscure their vision. Often about the same time the embers begin to drop on them creating total confusion. When handling livestock near fires try

to move them out of the smoke column as soon as possible. Wiping out eyes of horses or rinsing all animals with spray water can assist with their orientation and calmness. When naturally moving away from fires animals have no idea whether they are moving into an area where they may be trapped. They cannot hear the news reports—that's up to handlers.

## EARTHQUAKES

Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other seismic events tend to confuse not just livestock but wildlife also. The combination of vibration, noise, surface movement and magnetic field disruption can panic animals into running and charging.

## ALL DISASTERS

Just as with humans, disasters are not normal—do not expect normal reactions or handling. Be slow, deliberate and careful

with handling animals during and after disasters. Remember that all animals should be closely inspected for injuries and health issues. Wiping or rinsing animals while they are provided feed in a quiet setting with their herd mates will calm them the quickest. For health reviews and dealing with extreme reactions contact your veterinarian.

Identify handlers in your community who are adept at dealing with animals under duress such as veterinarians, stock contractors, agriculture producers, livestock sale yard employees and others before you need them. Recreational and novice handlers can generate additional risk for both handlers and livestock during disasters.



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Scott Cotton, Extension Educator, University of Wyoming Extension

Editor: Katie Shockley, University of Wyoming Extension

Design: Tanya Engel, University of Wyoming Extension

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