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Winter 2005

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Recommended Citation

Conroy, Andrew B.; Chapman-Bosco, Laurie; and Barney, Dwight, "Handling Large Farm Animals" (2005). *Faculty Publications*. 1391.

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Handling Large Farm Animals

A 4-H Farm Animal Handling Guide

Drew Conroy, Dwight Barney and Laurie Chapman-Bosco

Handling and working with your animal(s) is an important part of participating in a 4-H animal project. The skills needed to work with farm animals can be learned. The only way to learn those skills is to work with animals with the help of an experienced handler. Handling farm animals can be dangerous, especially when the handler doesn't understand animal behavior or respect the animal's strength.

Most farm animals enjoy being together. This need for companionship can create problems when you try to separate, halter, or transport animals that have always been together. Separation from other animals during training and handling can speed up the training process. Animals must learn to follow their handler and the handler must learn to safely guide their animals.

Learning to handle farm animals properly includes understanding the animals. Many novice handlers assume their animals are dumb and hard to teach, but most farm animals are quite intelligent. For example, an animal that learns to pull on the halter in order to get loose isn't dumb. This animal has learned that by pulling it will get exactly what it wants—freedom!

Control your animals

Animals are also very observant. They learn to watch and listen to their owners, even when it seems they aren't paying attention. Animals can sense your mood by watching your behavior or feeling the way you tug at their halter or reins. Often a 4-Her who doesn't feel like working an

animal will find that animal more difficult to work with. There is no magic to having well behaved animals, except a handler who is confident and willing to work with the animal. Some animals take longer than others to train but all farm animals can be handled safely and effectively if the proper techniques are used.

Part of maintaining good control is learning to anticipate what the animals will do before they do it. Many behaviors are predictable. For example, when a cow or horse goes to a show for the first time, the animal will encounter a number of new experiences. An experienced handler will prepare the animal by exposing him or her to groups of people, trailers, loud noises, and other animals before the show day. This same handling technique could be applied to clipping, washing and other common management practices. In handling farm animals, you must learn to be patient and understanding, yet firm at all times.

With the exception of swine, you should train farm animals to be led. The correct way to lead any animal is to stand on its left side with your right hand closest to the animal. The free end of the lead line or rope halter would be in your left hand to allow a better grip on the rope if the animal fights in the halter. *Never wrap the extra length of lead rope around your hand.*

If you stand too far in front of an animal, it often resists going forward. If you are too far back, they are hard to stop. Generally, you want to stand near their left shoulder for safety and for the best control.

Dairy Goat Handling

Dairy goats have a personality that makes them ideal for 4-H projects. Animals raised individually or in small groups with frequent handling are often friendly and bond quickly to their owners.

Most goats are very independent animals, difficult to herd, drive, or scare into movement. The easiest way to train them is teach them to come when called, train them to come to feed, or to lead them. Often younger goats will willingly follow an older animal.

Most goats can be easily handled and trained to lead with a collar. If the collar doesn't work, a halter is usually more persuasive. Most goats aren't large enough to be dangerous unless they have horns or you wrap a lead line around your hand. Even if a goat gets loose, it usually doesn't go far.

In training goats it is best to work with the animals alone. Sometimes separation from the rest of the herd can help the animal adjust to being handled. Goats will usually follow their handler if they are taken to new and exciting places. If you are firm but patient with dairy goats they usually learn quickly.

Dairy Cattle Handling

The easiest way to handle dairy cattle is to start working with them as calves. Generally small calves are easily captured and restrained, since most are bucket or bottle fed. Dairy calves are most often trained with a halter.

The animals usually balk at first or try to pull backwards, but as long as the calves aren't allowed to escape, they quickly learn that by following their handler the tension on the halter is less. Some calves are easier than others to train, but training to lead can usually be accomplished in a few short training sessions.

Frequent handling and haltering is a very effective technique in training animals

to the halter. Once the animals respect the halter, other handling procedures become much easier. The key to working with dairy cattle is remaining calm and persistent. Don't hit or tug excessively but at the same time do not allow the animals to escape. In training larger heifers or cows, the process is the same but you have to be prepared to control a larger animal. Tying an animal can often be an effective way to learn to respect the halter but NEVER leave an animal tied and unattended. They can easily become injured or choke themselves.

Once dairy cattle are trained, they are fun to work with. It's essential that dairy cattle become accustomed to frequent handling, as they will be handled often as mature animals.

Beef Cattle Handling

Working with young beef cattle is best; the younger the better. The animals often gain a lot of independence while they are nursing the cow and this makes initial training or handling more challenging than dairy cattle. This means more substantial techniques must be used to ensure quick and effective capture and restraint.

Calves that are difficult to halter break need to be worked more frequently than others. Be sure all halters and equipment are strong and not easily broken. Never leave a tied beef calf unattended as they will often fight the halter very aggressively at first. During each training session, try to calm the animals by feeding and grooming them.

Portable corrals, chutes and loading ramps are very effective at reducing stress on cattle and handlers. The design of facilities can have a great impact on how effective they are. For example, cattle will usually move more readily through curved chutes, up slight inclines, and from a dark to a well lighted area. While set-up or construction may take extra time, the end result is usually a better behaved and more easily handled animal. Cattle that have

learned to escape or resist initial capture will remember how to escape for a long time.

Sheep Handling

Working with sheep requires many of the same practices as other species of animals. Remember, sheep are easily frightened by sudden noises, movements or shadows. Always work slowly and easily; never rush these animals or pull their wool, as they are easily bruised.

When training sheep to lead by halter or by hand, it's easier to start working with them as lambs. Working with each animal for short periods, several times a day, allows the sheep to become accustomed to handling and leading without becoming exhausted or droopy.

Sheep are usually one of the easiest animals to train, but if they refuse to follow, you can urge them by placing your left hand under their chin and your right hand on the dock (or tail). Another effective technique is to lead a trained sheep ahead of the untrained one; this may speed up the process. Tying a haltered sheep to a wall or rail can also help teach them to respect the halter but never leave them unattended. In addition to possibly choking themselves, they are easy prey for any wandering dogs. Usually sheep learn to lead after several sessions but others may take more time and patience.

In the barn, the use of chutes and gates, as with beef animals, makes the job of moving and handling sheep much easier.

Swine Handling

Swine are one of the most intelligent farm animals. Their intelligence and strength are often a challenge for a young animal handler. One of the most effective ways to get swine used to frequent handling is to separate them from the herd and work with them individually. They will often bond with their owner and become very friendly if

they are penned individually for at least short periods of time.

Before moving swine, make sure they become familiar with alleyways, chutes and loading equipment. This is very important. Spreading pen manure on ramps or chutes will make the animals more eager to move into new areas.

You should never try to rush swine. Allow plenty of time for handling swine especially if you are unfamiliar with handling them. Swine can be stubborn, so try to make sure the first few times you move them all facilities have solid walls and non-slip floors. Sand makes an excellent bedding for moving and trucking swine.

Panels are essential equipment for moving swine. The panels should be large enough to block their view and movement, but small enough to be held and moved in one hand.

Training swine for show can be easier than other farm animals as they don't wear a halter and 100 percent control is very difficult. Pigs are shown or handled with a cane. Lightly tapping a pig on the left shoulder will make them turn right, while tapping it on the right will make them turn left. You should be able to move them forward by tapping the rump.

Proper show technique requires animals respond to the handler, but most judges allow the animals to settle down for a few minutes in the ring before they begin judging. Practice, time and patience will result in an animal that will respond to your directions. More than other farm animals, swine will often respond very well to rewards in the form of cookies or treats.

Horse Handling

When working with horses, it's essential that the horse respects you as a handler. Horses will often test their handler to see if they can get the upper hand. Horses

that learn to take advantage of their handlers will remember this for a long time. Horses are very intelligent farm animals, but never forget they can learn bad habits as well as good ones.

Knowing where to stand is critical to horse handling. Handlers should always stand on the near or left side. The right side is called the off side. When leading a horse always use a lead line, or, if using reins, be sure to take them over the head so if the horse spooks you will be able to maintain good control.

Staying next to their shoulder while leading can save you from being bitten, being struck at or kicked. If your horse bolts or spooks, go with it, staying by its shoulder and facing the same direction it is moving.

When leading a horse that refuses to go forward, hold a crop or schooling whip in your left hand along with excess line and use the crop lightly on the animal's side behind your back. Always use spoken commands before giving physical directions. Ask politely at first and if the animal doesn't respond, step up the volume of your request until you get the desired response.

When handling unruly horses, remember they can kick backwards or to their side with their hind feet (their reach is about 6 feet in any direction). When leading a horse the safest spot for the handler is close to the animal's shoulder.

Activities

Zeb has tied his calf to the lawn tractor in order to train it to lead. Before he gets a chance to start the tractor his mother calls him into the house for supper. He leaves his calf where it is and runs into the house.

Questions for group discussion

- ❖ What do you think of Zeb's training technique?

- ❖ What could happen to his calf while Zeb is eating his supper?
- ❖ How else might Zeb train his calf?

Additional Activities

- ❖ Have each club member properly halter an animal and tie a quick release knot.
- ❖ Demonstrate how to teach a young animal to lead. A young calf, sheep or goat can often be trained to lead at one meeting.
- ❖ Have senior club members demonstrate how to properly lead and present an animal for show.
- ❖ Invite livestock professionals to demonstrate how to quickly and effectively restrain an unruly animal.
- ❖ Have club members practice loading and unloading their animals into a truck or trailer, while the club leader observes and critiques the exercise.

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