

# Surviving in Today's Cattle Market:

*A Response to TSCRA President Jon Means*

By Herman Detering

Ranchers I have spoken with lately are becoming increasingly alarmed over production factors that are beyond their control: high prices for feed, fuel, fertilizer and, of course, the need for rain.

In addition, there is growing public concern about handling methods used in the production of cattle and about the impact of cattle on the environment. At the March Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association convention in Corpus Christi, TSCRA

“We will continue ... to live up to our mission of protecting the stewards of land and livestock in the Southwest.”

“We're all faced with rapidly rising costs ... but I believe the real battleground for us will be consumer acceptance of our product.”

“We must get the truth about our product and our practices out to the public.”

Above quotes from TSCRA President Jon Means, Van Horn, June 2008, *The Cattleman*

Courtesy of *The Cattleman* magazine.

President Jon Means declared the major challenge for 2008 and the future is to combat “the pressure on demand for beef brought on by animal activist groups.” Rising costs and economic uncertainty, he noted, present a great challenge, but he concluded “the real battleground for us will be consumer acceptance of our product.”

The good news here is that public acceptance of beef is a factor that is partially within the control of each rancher. A rancher can influence the quality of beef he or she produces along with the environmental impact of his or her operation through the husbandry applied to the land and the cattle.

Practicing the guidelines of the Beef Quality Assurance Program and the Producers Code for Cattle Care will go a long way toward satisfying public concern over handling practices and abuse.

This is critical in Means’ efforts to increase public demand for beef. Most Americans eat meat; few are vegetarians. But, as the recent Pew Commission Report on Industrial Farm Animal Production makes clear, a growing number of Americans are developing a deep concern about the handling of all domestic animals and are demanding evidence of humane treatment on the part of producers.

In addition, research now leaves no question about it: Emotional stress is detrimental to all aspects of the health and well-being of cattle. This translates into higher costs of production, which in today’s market could prove to be disastrous.

University experts such as Temple Grandin, Stanley Curtis, and John McGlone find that over the years there has been steady progress in animal welfare. Efforts to continue this progress can be found in the recent Texas Beef Council manual and DVD on low-stress handling. Both are available at no cost to all producers.

A major problem here is many producers have never seen low-stress handling or had the chance to apply these methods under

experienced supervision. Knowledge of the principles of low-stress handling is critical, as is watching an experienced person apply them. But finally, a handler needs to learn how to apply low-stress methods through supervised personal experience.

## From opposition to cooperation

Simply put, changing the behavior of cattle from opposition to cooperation results in easier, faster and safer handling. But, just how can this be done? This problem is being addressed today through workshops and demonstrations offered by universities, cattle producers’ associations and individual clinicians.

One of the basic things we must understand in low-stress handling is that cattle — as prey animals — live in constant fear of all predators. This includes a strong fear of humans, for we are the most successful predator on the planet. We must, therefore, take extra care to behave in a way that will reduce this fear to the lowest possible level.

If a handler approaches cattle with body language that suggests a predator on the hunt, then the cattle will run or turn and fight. If they are confined and unable to respond in either one of these ways, they will suffer a degree of stress that is extremely harmful and, if severe enough, can result in death.

The alternative to this is for the handler to approach cattle with restrained body language that mimics that of a natural leader of a herd. When this is done successfully, the cattle will accept his leadership and their initial opposition will largely melt away. In short, the handler must come to understand and apply “lingua de vaca”, the language of cattle.

If we don’t act like predators, our cattle won’t have to act like prey. If we don’t chase, yell and force them, they will soon learn it is not necessary to fight or run from us.

Calm acceptance of our leader-

ship is what low-stress handlers are working for when they put cattle through low-stress training. When we use the silent body language of the herd we are able to earn respect simply by causing them to yield to us. When we move them in this way, without threat or pain, they begin to trust us.

Prey animals cannot tolerate a situation where there is no one animal in control. They constantly test each other to find out which one is the most capable of leading the herd. To survive in their world, cattle must be able to flee immediately in the direction taken by the leader. In low-stress handling we try to tap into this principle of natural herd organization and take over the role of leader.

When we are successful at this, cattle experience a reduction of stress, even in situations that are painful to them. For example, when cattle are forced into a chute in a frightened state of mind, fear and pain get mixed together and they become more frightened and more stressed when subjected to any procedure, mild or painful. As a result they will resist entering the chute the next time they are worked.

If, however, they are properly prepared for the confinement of the chute and are brought in calmly, then they will reenter the chute time and again in a much calmer frame of mind.

By using low-stress methods, you will reduce the occasions when you have to doctor calves, especially during and immediately after weaning. You will also be able to use less elaborate and expensive facilities to work your cattle and often be able to assist a cow in the pasture that needs medication or help in calving.

The training to which I am referring is not simply applying the best low-stress techniques to cattle when they are routinely worked or loaded for market; it involves teaching them to move and be calm in your presence prior to actually working them.

In the July 2008 issue of *The Cattleman*, Katrina Waters empha-

sizes that “in times like these, where every penny counts, a little training can go a long way.” Truly, it is training that can be achieved within a week when done in circumstances where training is the only purpose of the handling. The result will be to bring about a change in the attitude and behavior of your cattle for a lifetime.

We must learn to understand and respect the psychology of cattle if we want to reduce stress in their lives and increase our productivity. If we offer cattle the best stewardship we can, we will both benefit. They will live longer, healthier and more productive lives and we will be able to ranch more profitably.

## Some training procedures

Calves, once weaned, should be moved from pen to pen just to get them accustomed to yielding to pressure in a calm way. They should be asked to pass by a handler in an alleyway until they can walk by in a calm manner. They should then be moved through the work chute, with nothing done to them, until they can walk through calmly, without resistance.

In the 2008 School for Successful Ranching, Dr. Ron Gill stressed that “proper handling is a both humane and economic necessity.” This handling involves an understanding of one core concept above all others: pressure and release.

It has been found in low-stress handling that cattle learn best through controlled pressure, applied and increased slowly. This pressure is just strong enough to cause them to yield, but not so strong that they begin to panic. Once they do yield, the pressure should be released immediately.

Low-stress handlers, whether they are working with horses or cattle, speak of “setting things up” so the animals can learn through their choices what we want them to do. In this way, our idea becomes their idea because we structure their options so the most attractive one to them is the one that we want them to choose.

When cattle are worked this

way, they behave like they are doing exactly what they want to and not like we are forcing anything on them.

Let me give you an example of a low-stress method of moving cattle out of a pen. The handler starts by moving cattle around in a pen and does not let them rest anywhere except by the gate. In this way, the cattle are only able to relax in the area where he would like them to be and are kept moving in other parts of the pen.

This approach stands in contrast to conventional handling where the cattle are driven in a particular direction. In low-stress handling the handler lets the cattle know where he does not want them to go rather than forcing them to go in a particular direction. As a result, both the handler and the cattle get what each wants. The cattle are able to relax without being pressured and the handler has them standing calmly at the gate, ready to move through.

The goal here is to try to copy the restrained pressure and quick release that prey animals use on each other. When we are successful at this, cattle come to respond to us as they would to a more dominant animal in their herd. Ironically, the more we work with them in this way, the closer they bond to us and the more calmly they follow our directions.

Here, there is no place for anger or punitive action on the part of the handler. He must always remember that cattle respond according to what they think they must do to survive. When a handler is unsuccessful in getting something done, he or she should understand that it was probably the way he or she set up the situation, timing or faulty use of pressure that caused the cattle to do what they did.

I am often told by ranchers that their cattle are trained because they willingly follow a pick-up full of hay. The ranchers are usually quite surprised when I tell them this behavior does not really mean that the cattle are trained or gentle. Here, following the pick-up full of hay is the cattle’s idea, prompted by hun-

ger. It has nothing to do with control over them.

To test the level of training of the cattle, I ask the rancher to send the cattle away from food if he or she really wants to see how well-trained they are!

Cattle that are not trained to yield to restrained pressure are really quite dangerous. When forced to move, not only do they become stressed, but they run a higher risk of injury to themselves or others.

To succeed in low-stress handling, start the cattle out in a calm state of mind when you work them. In this way, they can learn to weigh options and not just react with their instincts. When cattle are excited and in a “flight or fight mode” they are simply reacting with survival instincts and are not really being trained at all.

Cattle will always seek the route of least resistance, whether that is fight or flight. A low-stress handler is able to influence their choices with his or her body position and energy, and can open and close off spaces so cattle actually choose to move where he or she wants them to go.

A practical measure of success in any low-stress handling session was put very well by noted American horseman John Lyons. He said first, the handler must not get hurt; second, the animals are not hurt; and finally, the animals are calmer and more responsive when you finish working with them than they were when you started.

Low-stress handling can be of benefit in reaching two important goals of cattlemen today. It enables producers to minimize expenses and maximize production goals. It also can help producers maximize income through being able to show buyers calm cattle that show evidence of good treatment.

When tied to President Means’ effort to get the word out to the public, there is no question that low-stress handling can be an effective tool in gaining greater public acceptance of beef products. ■