

Safety Note #115

WORKING SAFELY WITH CATTLE



Photograph Courtesy of
Sierra Foothill REC

Information available from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health indicates more than 50,000 injuries occur annually at ranching and feedlot operations for cattle, hogs, or sheep. Of the annual total, about 15,000 injuries result from worker interactions with livestock. Approximately 25% of the injuries are fractures followed by, in order of decreasing frequency, sprains/strains, bruises, and cuts. The injuries are usually due to an animal stepping on, falling onto, squeezing against, or kicking the handler.

Cattle Characteristics

Cattle have a wide field of vision that encompasses about 300 degrees from the front of the animal backwards to their rear haunches (see diagram below). However, cattle also have poor depth perception and as a result, judge distances poorly. Hearing and the sense of smell are very good in cattle. There is a natural flight zone cattle maintain between themselves and other animals, including people. When the flight zone boundary is breached, cattle will begin to move away. Flight zones range from several hundred feet for range cattle to several feet or less for dairy cows. Because of their herding nature, cattle prefer to remain together rather than being isolated from the group.

Working Safely With Cattle

Understanding how cattle perceive and react to their surroundings provides guidance on working safely with cattle as follows:

- When working with cattle, wear appropriate personal protective equipment such as steel toed boots with nonskid soles, long pants, gloves, eye protection, and a shirt. As necessary, use a dust mask or respirator with appropriate cartridge.
- Learn the flight zone distance(s) of the cattle you work with.
- Always approach cattle within their field of vision. Move at a deliberate pace and make the animal(s) aware of your approach as you enter their flight zone.
- Be aware of signs of fear or aggression in cattle, such as pawing or snorting, a raised tail or ears, panicky behavior, and bellowing. Avoid frightened/spooked or aggressive cattle.
- Assure you have an escape route when working in close proximity to cattle.
- Making loud noises or moving quickly may startle cattle.
- Be careful around young animals. Try not to get between a new calf and its mother.
- Due to their aggressive temperament, take extra precautions when working with bulls.
- Promptly report injured or sick cattle to your supervisor or a veterinarian.
- Always wash your hands with soap and water after handling cattle or any other animal.

