Perception of the importance of human-animal interactions on cattle flow and worker safety on Minnesota dairy farms.

Sorge US¹, Cherry C², Bender JB².

Author information

Abstract

Proper cattle-handling techniques (stockmanship) are important to ensure calm animals and a safe work environment for dairy workers on farm. The objectives of this study were to (1) assess Minnesota dairy herd owners' attitudes toward stockmanship, its perceived importance for cow comfort and worker health, and the establishment of calm cattle movement; and (2) identify current resources and methods of stockmanship training on Minnesota dairy farms. A stratified-random sample of Minnesota dairy farmers were contacted via mail to participate in a 28-question survey. One hundred eight bovine dairy producers participated. Most commonly, respondents learned their cattle handling skills from family members (42.6%) and 29.9% of producers had participated in previous stockmanship training. Producers thought that the skill of the human handler was the most important factor in establishing good cattle flow. Cattle-handling techniques was the third most common topic for new-employee orientation after training in milking parlor protocols and milking parlor disinfection. Time limitations and language barrier were considered serious challenges for worker training. Work-related injuries were responsible for lost work days in the previous year in 13.3% of dairy herds and 73.3% of those injuries occurred while working with cattle. Producers perceived that cattle-related injuries were predominantly the handler's fault: either because of not paying enough attention to the animal or due to poor cattle handling skills. Facility design was considered the least important for the occurrence of worker injuries. Although no causal inference can be made, herds that had workers who had previously participated in stockmanship training had a 810 ± 378 kg (mean ± standard error of the mean) higher rolling herd average than those that did not, even after adjusting for herd size and bulk tank somatic cell count. However, 50% of respondents were not interested in attending future stockmanship training sessions. In conclusion, cattle handling skills are considered important by Minnesota dairy producers to ensure worker safety and cow flow. Limited availability of time, language barrier, and a perceived lack of training materials were considered challenges during the training of workers on farms.

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