



Cow Flow and Stockmanship

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Introduction

When cow flow is poor we have at best a tedious situation, at worst a welfare situation for both staff and cows.

The two main factors that affect cow flow are the stockman himself and the facilities he is using.

A good stockman will have an understanding of the normal behaviour of a cow and work with her.

Good facilities are those designed to suit the cow's needs. When there are problems the herd will "tell" us with a reluctance to flow. However, even if the facilities are not the best, good stockmen can still achieve acceptable cow flow by adapting their own behaviour.

What is good cow flow?

When we talk about cow flow we are talking about the herd rather than the individual, but what affects the individual – eg tight corners, stray electricity, will also affect the whole herd. Cow flow is "good" when the herd voluntarily flows into the holding yard and through the milking parlour. Most medium sized New Zealand herds of up to 500 cows will, with good cow flow, be milked in 1 ½ - 2 hours. Some, however, take 2 ½ - 3 hours because of poor cow flow.

It amazes me that we can bring cows weighing 500-600 kg in to a yard and expect them to quietly move into the milking bails, have their teats washed and allow us to put on the cups, milk them dry, squirt their udders and then let them out – all without any objection.

Human behaviour:

Observation of milkers

1. People can be very patient if milking times are short – about 1 ½ – 2 hours, after that milking staff start to lose patience easily, particularly in parlours where cow flow is poor.

The result is stress, poor observation of oestrus, mastitis, lameness. Animal handling skills suffer and cow flow is further disrupted.

2. Too many people in the parlour with not enough work to do results in impatience – they try to make the cows go faster. Impatience results in shouting, loud angry voices, (even swearing) and over use of backing gates.

3. The easiest way to ensure patience is to have shed rules, procedures and routines.

A cow is an amazingly cooperative "creature of habit" if trained correctly. "Every time we handle a herd of cows it is a training session" (1). Just one bad experience and cow flow suffers.

Observations in herds with good cow flow through the milking parlour

The milkers enjoy interacting with the cows they stroke them, pat them, talk to them. When they talk to them, they talk kindly using a voice tone similar to talking to children. They have a smooth routine. There are no sudden movements or noises (even if the cow flow is disrupted for any reason). The milking parlour is usually clean and tidy. They use the same routines every milking.

What are the benefits of good cow flow?

Milkings are quicker. Employed staff are always more content when the herd flows voluntarily and are less likely to get angry with the animals. Staff retention is higher in an industry that is struggling to attract experienced stockmen.

Cows that flow voluntarily through a milking parlour are more content and respond with quicker milk let down.

Achieving good cow flow with Stockmanship

a) On the laneway

Cows walk out of the paddock and settle into a fairly stable order as they move along the track. Leader cows and dominant cows set the speed of walking – the rest of the herd just follows.

Cows are allowed to flow at their own pace. The stockman follows keeping far enough behind the last cows to ensure the rear cows don't bunch up. He calls out or talks to the cows to encourage them to keep moving.

b) In the milking parlour

As the herd reaches the milking parlour the milking machines should be going. The first cows should be allowed to enter the bails and be milked on arrival. The cows entering the holding yard will start to readjust from a walking order to a milking order (2). Cows need space to do this so the backing gates should not be used to reduce the yard area for at least 15 to 20 minutes after the last cow arrives. The cows' heads should all be down while they are standing in the assembly yard. Milkers should not come out of the milking parlour to gather cows as this also disrupts the milking order. In herring bone sheds the milkers should commence cupping at the front of the shed – opposite end to the bail entrance. Any backing gates should not be used to push the cows towards the milking bails – they should only be used to gently take up space as the cows move forward. If motorized backing gates are used they must move forward a maximum of one metre at any one movement. The milkers should talk to the cows – calling them into the bails with one command using a gentle higher toned voice, and use a different command to tell them it is time to leave the milking parlour. Ideally these two commands – “calling” and “sending away” should be the same commands that are used with the younger stock – calves and heifers so that when they join the herd they are already trained.

New staff coming to the farm should be taught the commands and the correct tone of voice.