

12 Cow Behaviours and Cow Flow

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1. Rear foot placement is almost in the same position as the front foot:

If a cow can drift at a voluntary pace the front foot will be safely placed and the rear foot will also be placed in the same safe place. Under pressure and on slippery or painful surfaces the rear foot steps short.

Response: Reduce herding pressure if cow are short stepping and improve walking surfaces.

2. Cows walk and stand with their heads down:

With space for their heads to move up and down freely they can find safe foot placement, avoid cows of higher dominance and respond to pain if they stand on a rock.

If cows heads are up either on the track or in the shed it is because they are too tightly packed.

Response: Cows need space. Don't force cows to bunch up tightly on the track or in the milking shed.

3. Cows have a Pecking order:

Cows have a **walking order** that is slightly different to their **milking order**. After entering the milking yard cows need time to rearrange themselves before they enter the milking bails.

Response: Cows need space and time to re-arrange their position in the herd before entering the milking parlour.

4. The majority of the dominant cows are at the front of the herd, but a significant number are present throughout the herd including the rear group:

It is important that cows have space at all times to keep their distance and avoid forced interaction with cows around them of similar or higher dominance.

Response: Don't put pressure on the rear cows in the herd.

5. Dominant cows set the walking speed of the herd.

Pressure on the rear cows on the track or by the backing gate causes the rear group to compact because they won't overtake the dominant cows in front of them. The front cows are almost unaffected and so don't walk any faster - they continue at their own speed.

Response: Don't put pressure on the rear cows in a herd.

6. Cows follow the leaders – their movement is forward.

Under pressure lower dominance cows and heifers reverse out of tight spots. So a cow reversing indicates too much pressure.

Response: On the track increase the distance between the herdsman and the herd. In the milking shed the pressure will be from the backing gate.

7. Cows avoid bumping other cows side to side:

Dominant cows will push in among other cows when under pressure causing sideways bumping and shoving and unplanned foot placement.

Response: Identify and reduce the cause of pressure. Cows need a minimum area for congregating in a milking yard (1.3 square metres for Jerseys, 1.8 for large Holstein Friesians)

8. Cows respond to voices:

Cows are afraid of low, harsh voices. Calling out or whistling to cows from behind the herd along the track keeps them moving without causing fear.

Response: Use a higher friendly tone or whistle from behind the herd along the track to keep them moving and to call cows into the milking bails. (never a sharp gruff low voice).

9. Cows have flight/fight distances:

Every herd is different. If a herd has never been hurt or has learned to trust you, then the distance may be very short. If you keep behind the herd and outside the flight/ fight distance, compaction of the rear group will be minimal

Response: Find the flight distance for your herd and always keep outside it.

10. Cows have two balance points:

Their **shoulder** can be used to direct them backwards or forwards, their **backbone** to direct them left and right. For example coming out of the pit to gather cows puts you in front of the shoulders and the cow turns away.

Response: Use the balance points correctly, don't come out of the pit to gather cows.

11. High and low dominance cows use different feet to push with when responding to pressure.

A dominant cow in a tight situation pushes sideways using the back leg closest to the cow she is leaning against for propulsion. The white-line of the rear outer claw takes most of the pressure. **A lower dominance animal will reverse out of a tight situation** using a front foot for propulsion. The front inner white-line takes most of the pressure.

Response: Reduce herding pressure or else white-line injuries will occur.

12. Cows are creatures of habit:

Cows respond positively and flow better if they have a consistent routine. The top gate and backing gate must be moved in the same way by all milkers or cow flow is negatively affected.

Response: Milking must be “an exercise in contentment.” All routines must be the same every day. Voices, herding technique, milking technique, moving the top gate and backing gate must all be done in the same way by all milkers.

