



COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO SAFETY

Put R.A.N.G.E to work

The safety of people often falls by the wayside in the discussion about animal welfare.

Michelle Welsh of Welsh Animal Wellness incorporates the human aspect into her RANGE program when she designs customized training seminars for ranchers, feedlots, women's ranching workshops and 4-H groups.

Welsh has garnered a wealth of knowledge of animal health and handling through years of practical experience that began while growing up on the farm and participating in 4-H beef and light horse clubs. She went on to study animal science at Lethbridge Community College and now has another 24 years of experience working as a professional in the feedlot industry to her credit. She and her husband Darcy raise commercial and purebred Charolais cattle and Appaloosa horses on their ranch near Strathmore, Alta.

RANGE is an acronym for steps to follow when you see an animal that needs assistance, Welsh explains. R is for recognize, A is for area of wellness affected, N is for need a response, G is for get into action, and E is for e-filing documentation. Knowledge in these key areas will increase safety for animals and people, improve productivity, increase efficiency, and up the level of professionalism on ranches and in feedlots, Welsh explains.

Communication is the common denominator in the RANGE steps. Effective animal health and handling involves constantly interacting with other people, such as your family members, co-workers, supervisor, veterinarian and the public, as well as with the animals and the environment in which you will be working.

Communicating with people

Your first consideration when handling routine procedures or health issues as they arise should be whether the situation is urgent or tolerable — that is, can it wait an hour, a day or until next week if need be? Let the animals and your environment dictate your decision, Welsh advises.

Do you have the resources to get the job done? It's crucial to think about this when you are working by yourself and to understand your limitations. Always remember to look out for yourself first because if you get injured, you won't be able to help the animal at all. Never let pride stop you from calling 911 or asking someone to drive you to the hospital if you have been injured.

"Plan a successful outcome by having plans A, B and C in place before you begin. Most people have a plan A and a few have a plan B," Welsh says, "but it's highly unusual for anyone to have a plan C."

Go over the steps in the plan with everyone who will be working with you so that there won't be any surprises. Make sure all of the people involved know the routine and their roles to avoid having to holler back and forth above the bawl of the animals, which will only lead to chaos. Once you start the job, focus on the plan and use your judgment based on past experiences to adjust to changing circumstances as you go. Empower your co-workers to use the benefit of their own experience as well.

Communicate with your environment

Be aware of shortfalls in the environment whether you will be working in a corral with all of the amenities, or out in a wide-open pasture.

Part of your environment is the animals themselves, Welsh explains. Understand that they will act and respond differently if they are excessively hungry, going through a postpartum depression, or under duress from extremes in the weather (cold, heat, storms, mud, wind and insects).

Assess the situation from a safety standpoint considering the experience of your team, available working space and equipment. There are always options, she says.

Make sure the appropriate equip-

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ment is available, it's in proper working order and that you know how to use it appropriately. Animals deserve to be protected from further injuries resulting from faulty equipment, she adds.

Likewise, familiarize yourself beforehand with the products you will be using, the proper technique required, safety concerns and emergency protocols.

Organize the environment so that there is a safe escape route for people on foot and horseback. If working from a horse, arrange enough room to accommodate each animal's comfort zone and to execute the maneuvers.

Allow more than enough time to get the job done because rushing will escalate stress and compromise safety. "It's tough to forget about time in today's fast-paced world. If the job is supposed to take 10 minutes, doing it in eight is better, but if it took 12 minutes and was more enjoyable, then it was time well spent," she says.

Communicating with animals

Learn how to read animal body language. An animal that feels threatened may hold its head higher than usual, widen its eyes, bob its head, paw the ground, broaden its stance and push out its chest to make itself appear larger and make unusual noises — just like people do when they feel threatened.

Size does matter when it comes to animals' perception of people, Welsh says. For example, if you hold a herding aid out from your body, you will appear larger and more threatening to animals than if you hold it perpendicular to your body.

Don't try to dominate the animals. Even that tame cow that likes a scratch on the shoulder when she's out on pasture could turn on you when threatened. "Always remember, the innate relationship between cattle and people is that people are predators. Cattle's first instincts are flight, fear and protection of their young. Realize and work with the fact that their comfort zones will increase or decrease according to the situation," she explains.

Take time to observe the animals in the outlying area for clues as to how you are affecting the herd on the whole. Livestock have keen hear-

ing and sight, so whistling, hollering, clapping, chap slapping and sudden movements may trigger fear in nearby animals as well as those quite a distance away.

Listen to the noises animals make and learn to distinguish the different tones and what they mean. During a class with feedlot employees, she taped animal calls at feeding time when the feed truck broke down. The noise escalated from a complaining type of bawling to a tone of urgency. Similarly, the call a cow makes when looking for her calf is different from that when she's protecting her calf or trying to dominate other animals. Recognizing the tone of the call of animals in distress can clue you in to the situation long before you see the animal.

Review and revise

Afterward, take time to review why the situation went well, or why it got out of hand and how you will prevent it from happening again. "When you think back, you will realize that there were clues that you could have recognized," Welsh says.

Practise animal handling communication and safety when it's not an emergency. Animals are trainable and will learn to associate you with stress if you always use dominating, fast-paced handling methods. Ease of movement and differing plans for success will work out better. Learn how to ask animals — and people — rather than demand.

"The beef industry is an old and admirable industry and profession — we know our craft, our animals, our environment and how one affects the other," she says. "RANGE is five easy steps to follow to take animal care to a professional level and prove ourselves to our communities and the world to pull our industry into another level of income."

In addition to providing classroom, hands-on and management training, Welsh Animal Wellness offers custom evaluation of animal-health care and handling procedures. The Alberta Farm Animal Council now offers some assistance for groups who want to offer RANGE cattle-health care and handling classes. Contact AFAC at 403-932-8050 or Michelle Welsh at 403-901-0783, www.welshanimalwellness.com.

— Debbie Furber 