

Low stress cattle handling.



The first photo is of a young cow and her calf. The calf was born at the beginning of April. Two more heifers are due to calve soon. These animals, plus two yearlings and three more calves that were born here last summer comprise a “welcoming committee” for new arrivals.

Here is how that works.

Each year, from April through July, I buy 100 beef animals. Most are calves, some are yearlings and some are cull cows. I then raise and or fatten them on grass for my customers.

I select virtually all of those animals from a reputable sale barn. The sale barn is in a good location near the Minnesota-Wisconsin border. That is a good location, because good grass fed animals come from small farms in northwestern Wisconsin.

Buying cattle through a sale barn seems to be the only way to get good animals at a reasonable price.

That bothered me until I spoke with Joel Salatin about it. He does the same thing.

Almost all of the cattle are sold as singles. That means they are the only one I am able to buy from their home herd on that day.

The animals are under terrible stress during this process. Cattle are herd animals. Without a herd, they are terribly lost. It generally takes two days from the time the animals are selected at their home farm, until they reach the farm, pen or feedlot of their new owner. During that time, they are separated from their herd of origin, yelled at, poked, prodded, driven through pens and locked in a headstall, where they are subjected to vaccinations and other indignities, yelled at some more, loaded onto trucks or trailers, hauled long distances and unloaded with a group of strangers. Those strange animals are scared and angry. The bigger animals push them around, especially if the space is small.

At their new home, the water tastes different and is provided in a different way. The food has no connection with what they have been eating.

Everything is confusing, everything is frightening.

I am not being overly dramatic. The process of separating and hauling cattle is so stressful that farmers gave the illness that normally comes from it a name. It is called Shipping Fever. All cattle that are separated and moved in this way are susceptible to Shipping Fever. Numerous medical treatments have been developed for it. Amazingly, little consideration has been given to prevention of the disease. Just medical treatments for the disease and its symptoms.

In general, younger animals are more susceptible to Shipping Fever than older animals. Apparently, older animals can handle the trauma better.

Contrary to its name, Shipping Fever seldom involves a fever but it is very serious. It frequently results in death from pneumonia-like symptoms. Seemingly healthy animals develop respiratory symptoms and die in a day or two.

As a buyer, I am on the tail end of this process. (No pun intended.) There are limitations on what I can do for these cattle.

I carefully select animals that give all the signs of being healthy and vigorous.

I have every animal rechecked by a veterinarian. They get vaccinations and treatments that comply with the organic standards. If the vet suspects an animal is ill, that animal is treated with antibiotics as necessary. Fortunately, antibiotic treatment is necessary for about one animal each year.

The greatest good I can do for the animals is to reduce their stress level as quickly as possible.

That is where the Welcoming Committee comes in.

The first thing the new animals need is a herd. The welcoming committee is a mixed group of calm cows, calves and yearlings for them to join. The animals that I keep overwinter are specially calmed and trained. They are accustomed to my presence and relaxed when I am around. The new animals although frequently spooky and untrusting, closely observe how the resident animals and I interact.

The animals have lots of space, grass and easily accessed water. I provide hay in several feeders so the cattle do not have to compete.

The results are dramatic.

The second photo is of the herd and seven new animals just two hours after they arrived at our farm.

They have already bonded and blended together. They are intermingled and resting with full bellies.

Two of the new arrivals are lying flat in restful abandon. No doubt they are exhausted but clearly, they feel safe and relaxed.

The members of the welcoming committee are trained to come when I call. They remain tranquil when I walk among them. They are also trained to follow me when I lead them. That is necessary because we rotate the herd through 70 pastures during the growing season.

The new animals see this behavior. By the third day, the entire herd will come when I call. They are already trained to follow me to new pastures.

It is quite unlikely that any of these new animals will succumb to Shipping Fever. They are at the start of a very good summer. Best regards. Tom

