

Consider the Consequences of Bad Behavior

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Temperament of cattle has long been recognized to influence production efficiency by having an impact on cattle handling and performance. More recently, scientists have suggested that flighty behavior of individual cattle can also affect the performance of the entire group. So, letting just one flighty calf slip passed the sort could decrease the performance of the entire group. For humans, temperament is defined as the way a person thinks, behaves or reacts. For cattle, a good definition for temperament is the intensity of their “fight or flight” instinct.

Some of the performance measures that are impacted by temperament are health, feed efficiency, weight gain, dressing percentage and meat quality. Before discussing trials that have reported the effects of temperament on performance, it is important to understand how it is measured in research settings and how that translates to real-world application. Scientists that study disposition in cattle often use three methods to grade temperament: 1) pen scores, 2) chute scores and 3) exit velocity.

Pen and chute scores use a 1 to 5 ranking where 1 is calm and 5 is flighty. Pen scores are taken by a person entering a pen with a group of cattle and applying a score between 1 and 5 where a score of 1 indicates that the cattle are not excited by humans and a score of 5 signifies that the cattle run into fences or charge humans when approached. Chute scores evaluate cattle on how they react to being secured in a working chute. Exit velocity is a measurement of how quickly cattle cover a set distance when released from a working chute. The faster they leave the chute, the more temperamental they are expected to be.

Sierra Lockwood, a graduate student in Animal Science at the University of Tennessee, analyzed the effects of temperament of bull performance at the UT Bull Test facility at the Middle TN AgResearch and Education Center in Spring Hill. One of the results was that high-headed bulls became less excitable during the testing period. But, it is important to note that extremely aggressive bulls were sent back to the producer’s farm at delivery rather than being accepted into the test. This could mean that culling cattle for extreme temperament and working to acclimate those in the mid-range is a sufficient approach.

Excitable feeder cattle do not eat enough feed, they gain slower and less efficiently, and require more health treatments. The effects of poor temperament on feeder cattle performance is obvious as you see the bidding stop early when high-headed calves come through the sale ring. Poor temperament lowers fertility in heifers and mature cows. It always seems like the most high-headed cow in the herd check pregnant when we are looking for one more reason to cull it. But, that is more likely perception because the research shows that temperamental cows and heifers, of any breed or breed type, are less likely to breed in a reasonable amount of time.

Carcass quality potential is becoming a more important measure for cow/calf and stocker operators regardless of whether or not they retain ownership through the feeding phase. Especially as that information flows back “upstream” when packers place more pressure on feedlots to source cattle that will produce a more desirable end product. It is common knowledge that extremely excitable cattle are more apt to produce dark cutting beef that is considerably less

valuably. But dark cutters are not the only negative result from temperamental cattle. A calf that is more flighty, and more severely stressed by handling or human presence, will produce less marbling and tougher beef when finished.

The negative effect of excitable temperament is not limited to the individual flighty animal. Most observant cattlemen have seen this in the cow herd and calf crop alike. If this influence of excitable temperament persists through the stockering and feeding phases, the negative influence of temperamental cattle on performance will be amplified. In essence, one bad apple can spoil the barrel.

All these examples illustrate the fact that flighty cattle hurt the bottom line for cow calf producers, stocker operators, backgrounders, and feeders. Most experienced buyers and managers avoid purchasing notoriously temperamental cattle but this selection criterion should also be applied to groups of cattle with only one or two “high-headed” cows or calves. Paying close attention to temperament should stimulate cow-calf producers to use it as a genetic selection tool that will eventually bring calmer calves to the sale.