

MALAYSIAN FARM MANAGEMENT NOTE 3

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STOCK WELFARE

The five basic freedoms of livestock

The welfare of cattle can be summarised in the “five basic freedoms” as follows:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst, through ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
2. Freedom from discomfort, through provision of appropriate shelter and comfortable resting areas.
3. Freedom from pain, by prevention and, when sick, rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour by providing adequate space, proper facilities and the company of other animals.
5. Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoids suffering.

All management and housing systems should be designed, constructed, maintained and managed to assist with these five freedoms.

The six basic elements of stock welfare

Specific to dairy herd management, stock welfare can be broken down to six basic elements.

1. Facilities and equipment

These should be well designed, maintained and operated to ensure a high level of animal welfare, minimal stress or chance of injury. This includes:

- Protection from extremes of weather,
- Provision of sufficient space with minimal possibility of injury,
- Flooring designed to minimise slipping, falling and lameness,
- Milking machinery maintained regularly to ensure minimum stress to cows,
- Facilities for water, feeding, milking and restraint appropriately designed and maintained,
- Laneways, tracks and gateways designed to minimise stress and injuries,
- Equipment for euthanasia cleaned and in good working order.

2. Provision of feed and water

These should be provided with consideration of environment, age, body condition and stage of lactation that ensures their health, well being and productivity. That is:

- Stock should have access to feed and water of appropriate quality and amount.
- Stock should be fed rations formulated and balanced to provide the necessary nutrients for their desired level of performance.
- Short and long term plans are in place to manage feed and water shortages and drought.
- Practices should be in place to reduce the potential risk of toxicity or contamination during storage.

3. Herd management

Dairy cattle should be routinely managed and handled to minimise stress, injuries and disease and promote good health and welfare. Such procedures should ensure that:

- Reproductive practices should be carried out competently to ensure good animal welfare and reproductive outcomes.

- Other routine husbandry procedures such as calving induction, dehorning and castration, if required, are carried out to minimise pain.
- Systems to manage disease and other animal health disorders should optimise the planning, prevention and monitoring of dairy herd health.
- Disease, injury, illness and stress should be identified and treated promptly with suitable expert advice sought as required.
- Animals are regularly inspected to monitor their health and welfare.

4. Humane destruction

Weak, ill or injured cattle and calves should be identified and treated appropriately or humanely destroyed using approved methods.

- Stock requiring humane destruction are identified and promptly euthanised.
- Competent staff are available to carry out humane destruction, using approved methods.

5. Staff competency

All staff responsible for managing and handling dairy stock should be competent in their tasks and aware of their responsibility for good animal care.

- Staff carrying out routine husbandry, surgical procedures, reproductive procedures, administering health treatments and handling and transport of cattle are appropriately trained or experienced.
- All staff handling stock can identify signs of illness, abnormal behaviour or stress and ensure appropriate action is taken.
- There is a competent person either available on site or that can be contacted to handle emergencies and humane destruction when necessary.
- Staff behave in a manner to minimise fearfulness in cattle.

Stockmanship, plus the training and supervision necessary to achieve required standards, are the key factors in the handling and care of livestock. A management system may be acceptable in principle, but without competent, diligent stockmanship, the welfare of animals cannot be adequately safeguarded.

6. Preparation, selection, sale and transport of stock

Stock should be selected and appropriately prepared for transport to ensure they are fit for the intended journey.

- Preparation for sale and transport includes appropriate actions for feed and water curfews, identification and handling to minimise stress.
- Stock are selected for transport with consideration of age, class and condition to ensure they are fit for the intended journey.
- Any weak, ill or injured stock are not transported until deemed fit by a competent operator.
- Stock should be handled with care during loading and unloading.

Other general principles of stock welfare

Whether housed in cubicles, straw yards or cow sheds, in order to maximise performance and ensure satisfactory standards of welfare, the accommodation must provide for stocks' basic needs. As an absolute minimum, the housing must provide a comfortable, clean, well drained and dry lying area together with shelter from adverse weather. It must allow the animal to move freely around without risk of injury.

Cows at pasture choose to lie down for 12 to 14 hours each day, so a similar target should be achieved with stock in sheds. If cows spend less time lying down, they are likely to spend more time standing in

loafing or feeding areas which can adversely affect hoof health. Sheds should provide a minimum loafing area of 3 m² per cow with at least 3 m between rows of cubicles.

Most farmers believe that animal welfare is just good cattle husbandry. The major welfare issues facing dairy farming include:

- Housing and cow comfort,
- Castration,
- Dehorning,
- Branding,
- Transportation,
- Slaughter.

Lameness can be a major problem, both from the point of animal welfare and farmer profits. Farmers frequently only recognise 40 to 50% of lameness problems and these are often well advanced, making them difficult to treat. The cow's environment, both social and physical, and her ability to cope with it ultimately determines how bad lameness can become.

Early separation of calves from their dam is another welfare issue which is practised for animal health reasons, to improve the likelihood of calves receiving sufficient quality colostrum in their first 24 hr of life.

It is important to maintain animals in good body condition, house them in social groups in clean environments with adequate space to move around and rest comfortably, maintain feed, medication and production records and compassionately handle animals undergoing management practices such as dehorning or castrating and those that are injured or ill.

Most western countries have strict codes of animal welfare covering transport, housing, handling and feeding. Farmers purchasing dairy stock from such countries may be expected to abide by the principles of that country's animal welfare codes. This is particularly the case with young stock, with the following section detailing Australia's welfare code for dairy calves.

Problems of confinement

Dairy stock imported from western countries have almost invariably been reared under grazing conditions, hence have never been exposed to a continual shed environment, as is common on most small holder farms. Compared to grazing, confinement creates specific problems such as:

- Restricting opportunity to seek comfort, for example if only provided with cement floors
- Creating problems of high humidity, which can be more detrimental than high temperature
- Limiting opportunity for exercise hence the need for routine hoof trimming
- Increasing exposure to infectious diseases
- Other health issues, such as mastitis and uterine infections when hygiene is poor during milking and calving
- Creating problems of heat detection for artificial insemination
- Requiring greater efforts into sanitation
- Magnifying problems of social dominance
- Increasing capital investment