

# Low-stress cattle handling a priority with 18,000 head

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**BY FRANCES ANDERSON**

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**L**inwood – Leighton Kolk may be a Western cattle rancher, but he’s no cowboy...at least not the stereotypical kind of “Yeehaw! Round’em Up!” cowboy. And the folks that work on Kolk’s farm may arrive in hats and boots, but unless they leave their Cowboy attitude at the door, they won’t be there for long.

That’s because Kolk Farms Ltd., of Iron Springs, Alberta, practices low stress cattle handling.

There’s three good reasons, explains Kolk – and the first is human safety. He’s got 18,000 cattle and 16 or so employees at his three feedlots at any given time, and he knows that wild cattle are dangerous, so he aims to keep them calm.

This takes training - both staff and the cattle!

Kolk, who was in Ontario recently, talking to beef farmers, jokes that if cowboys carried guns there would be a lot less cattle in the world!

“I think we’ve all been in a situation where we’re working with livestock, and trying to get them to do something, and the more we try, the less it works!”

“So, in the past five or six years, we’re really worked on low stress handling,” Kolk said. Using video, taken with a drone this fall, Kolk showed his handlers cutting one or two cattle out of a pen of 250 to 300 and calmly heading them out the gate and down the lane.

Kolk’s second reason for low stress handling is animal welfare.

New employees are introduced to the farm’s welfare policy. It outlines their commitment to good nutrition and environment for their animals, low stress handling, pain control for surgery, and euthanasia instead of suffering.

“We talk about mistreatment. We do not beat cattle,

hit them or try to push them where they can’t go. We do not use electric prods ... anymore,” he said. The welfare policy also requires “if they see mistreatment, they will report it to me and the vet.”

After employees read and understand the policy, “I ask them to sign it,” said Kolk.

If training employees is the first step, training the animals is a close second. When they’re introduced to the pen, they’re walked to the back of the pen, and then to the front again, a couple of times for the first five days. It teaches the animals to move easily, without consequence.

The handlers work on foot, or horseback. Another trick, when they arrive in a pen is to rattle the chain and bang the gate to alert the herd to the fact that “THE GATE IS OPEN!”, so they know there’s a place to go if they’re asked to leave.

“Animals are really good at communicating if you know how to communicate with them,” said Kolk, so a rider on a horse will lean both the horse’s head and her own body away to allow an animal to go by. They use just enough pressure to stop their flight, then give them time and space to find the right way forward.

Kolk is also a big fan of the Bud Box system that brings a group into a double chute, then lets them circle round and out in single file. It seems to work better than the solid-sided, covered, circular handling “tub”. He thinks it’s because the animals can see each other better through the open side rails in the “box”.

He’s equipped the squeeze chute for processing with a neck extender and wouldn’t farm without it. “It keeps the animals from getting hurt, and, when you’re putting a \$1 or \$2 implant in their ear, you don’t want it to end up on the ground.”

Better productivity is the third reason Kolk likes keeping animals calm. They’ll use less calories during the finishing period, and yield better quality meat if they’ve learned to remain calm during processing.

Other welfare considerations include proper castration; “birth control” for heifers, and thoughtful bull selection. Kolk said they castrate with a knife, but use



**Kolk Farms main feedlot at Iron Springs, Alberta.**

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medication that provides 24 hours of pain control. They ultra sound all females, heifers and calves, on arrival at the feedlot, so they don’t have any surprise deliveries, despite buying “open” heifers.

Bulls shouldn’t produce a calf too big for the cow to deliver, and “if you can, choose bulls that don’t have horns,” he said. Cattle also need adequate facilities to calve in the dead of winter. Kolk’s solution was to shift the calving season so the calves from their 300 cows are now born on grass.

However, Kolk Farm staff can do all the right things for their cattle, but lose all the benefit in five hours, if a Gladiator with an electric prod gets out of the transport truck. And that’s why Kolk doesn’t let drivers get into the loading pen.

Kolk Farms ships cattle every weekday morning, so has a large circular handling tub for this work. They let in just as many animals as they need for a single compartment of the truck and they go fairly easily around a curve and up the ramp.

Marketing cattle by contract, using a grid, is another thing that Kolk does differently. Four years ago, he



**Leighton Kolk: “We do not beat cattle, hit them or try to push them where they can’t go.”**

teamed up with four other ranchers within a 40-mile radius, bringing 100,000 head capacity among 12 cattle yards, to the bargaining table.

“We are like-minded,” said Kolk. “We went to Cargill and said ‘What do you want?’ And we do our darnedest to supply them.”

In the first year, the premium was “all right.” But after demonstrating that they could deliver – and delivering on a regular weekly basis, it’s gotten better. Now they make an annual trip to the head office in Wichita, each fall.

All five farmers contribute data to a computer analysis program, so they have good information on the effect of cattle colour, gender, and

feeding history. As a result, they know fairly precisely when the animals will tip over into high backfat. This allows them to ship carcasses up to 1,050 pounds without penalty.

Their marketing agreement also commits the farmers to exceeding some industry standards. They provide more pen space - 175 square feet per head - and straw bedding. “Our cattle are cleaner. We don’t crowd them as much,” Kolk explained.

These changes “are the right thing to do for the animal,” said Kolk. But it’s not enough do it, and document it, he said. We’ve got to share what we do with our neighbours in town. “We do tours all the time!”