

## Improving Pig Handling

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Improving pig handling can increase productivity while decreasing stress on both hogs and employees. There are a lot of well known researchers that have shown how stressful handling not only affects the pigs physically, but also physiologically with lower pork quality. Therefore, the key to pig handling is to remain calm and use the pig's behavior to drive them instead of using fear and force.

There are several behavior and physiological signs animal handlers need to be aware of when moving hogs. During handling, pigs that are feeling stressed and/or fearful will vocalize more. If this continues and pigs are continued to be handled aggressively the pig's skin will become red and the animal will begin panting with its mouth open. When any of these signs are noticed in pigs while handling them, we need to re-evaluate the farm's animal handling procedures.

There are several things producers can do to not only enhance their pig handling skills, but also to prepare the pigs for movement. Dr. Temple Grandin found that pigs will balk less and drive more easily at the slaughter plant if the producer walks through the pens every day; only 10 to 15 sec/day is required. Producers can also walk pigs in the aisles during finishing to help produce calmer animals. This trains pigs to get up in an orderly manner and calmly move around the person. It is important to teach the pigs to flow around the person. If the handler stands still and allows the pigs to approach him and chew on his coveralls, they may become more difficult to drive at the slaughter plant because they tend to follow the handler instead of allowing themselves to be driven. To avoid frightening the pigs, the handler must never kick or slap them. Animals can develop fear memories that are difficult to eradicate. They form a circuit in the brain that allows an animal to quickly flee if it sees or hears the same frightening stimulus.

#### **To Improve Handling Practices:**

- Move small groups of animals (4-6) and always be able to reach the front animal. Avoid individual movements.
- Do not overload the crowd pen, the pigs need room to turn.
- Eliminate electric prods and instead opt for driving aids that use the animal's flight zone to drive them.
- Eliminate visual distractions by looking for distractions such as shiny reflections, a dangling end of a chain, drain gratings, or people visible up ahead at the pig's level.
- Reducing noise results in reduced squealing and pig pile-ups.
- The handler must pass the point of balance at the shoulder to induce the animal to move away in the opposite direction. Animals speed up and move faster when a handler is inside their flight zone. Avoid continuous pressure on an animal's flight zone.
- Slow is Faster. Move pigs at a slow walk. Sudden jerky motions frighten the animals. In the wild, sudden movements are associated with predators.