

Scoring of Docility in Limousin Cattle

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Docility in cattle is the way cattle behave when being handled by humans or put in an unusual environment such as being separated from the mob in a small yard. What we define as poor docility is a survival trait in the wild – fear of anything unusual and the desire to escape. In domesticated cattle it is exhibited as flightiness. This can be modified by a lot of handling.

It is a highly heritable trait that can be improved genetically.

By scoring the docility of calves and submitting these scores for analysis we have been able to calculate docility EBVs for sires, dams and young sale bulls. These EBVs are considered by many buyers as the most important bit of information they can get on young Limousin bulls.

Limousin breeders are strongly encouraged to score the docility of their calves according to the scoring system shown below and report those scores and submit them to the Limousin Society for analysis. The recommended time of scoring is at weaning or shortly afterwards. The advantage of scoring at weaning is that all calves should have had similar treatment so variation in handling prior to scoring should be minimized. . Calves must be scored older than 60 days and before they are 400 days old.

Recommended Scoring Systems

The test can be carried out as a yard test or a crush test.

Crush Test

The calves are put up a race and individually held in the crush for about 30 seconds. Their behaviour in the crush and on exit from the crush can be scored on the 1-5 scoring system below.

1. Docile

Settled, somewhat dull, does not pull on headgate when in crush, exits crush calmly.

2. Restless

Quieter than average but slightly restless, stubborn during handling, may try to back out of crush, pulls back on headgate, some flicking of tail, exits crush promptly.

3. Nervous

Nervous and impatient, a moderate amount of struggling, movement and tail flicking, repeated pushing and pulling on headgate, exits crush briskly.

4. Flighty (wild)

Jumpy and out of control, quivers and struggles violently, may bellow and froth at mouth, continuous tail flicking, defecates and urinates during handling.

5. Aggressive

May be similar to Score 4 but with added aggressive behaviour, fearful, extreme agitation, continuous movement which may include jumping and bellowing while in crush, exits crush frantically and may try to attack through the crush.

Yard Test

The yard scoring system is required when cattle have had considerable handling and do not exhibit variations in behaviour in the crush test. Experience in handling cattle is required for this test and for the safety of the handler.

The calves are individually put into a small square yard and the handler should attempt to hold the animal in one corner away from other cattle for about 30 seconds. The animal can be scored on the 1-5 scale listed below according to its behaviour in the test.

1. Docile

The animal is easily held in the corner and the handler can get close enough to put his stick on the animal.

2. Restless

The animal can be held in the corner but exhibits some restlessness and flicking of the tail. The handler cannot get close enough to put his stick on the animal before it moves away.

3. Nervous

The animal is not easily held in the corner even when the handler is some distance back from the animal. Continual movement and tail flicking.

4. Flighty (wild)

The animal cannot be held in the corner, frantically runs the fenceline and may jump when penned individually, exhibits long flight distance.

5. Aggressive

Similar behaviour to Score 4 but is also aggressive towards the handler, stares at the handler and threatens to charge or charges (handler is advised to exit the yard before the animal actually charges).

Notes on Scoring

While the scoring system is a five point scoring system intermediate scores of 1.5, 2.5, 3.5 and 4.5 are acceptable for animals which exhibit behaviour which is intermediate between the above scores. It is very important to use a range of scores of at least one whole point for the group. It is normal to get a range of at least two whole points in a group of ten or more.

Management Groups

If animals have had different levels of handling prior to scoring they should be recorded as separate management groups when the scores are submitted.

How the Scores are Analyzed

The analysis of these scores to produce EBVs removes the variation in the amount of handling that calves have had prior to scoring and variations between scores. An individual calf is only ever compared with other calves reared in the same group and scored by the same scorer. Genetic linkages between groups and herds allow the EBVs for animals in different groups and herds to be compared.