



Vet Call

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Working chute design

Working facility design is based on knowledge of cattle behavior. Cattle should be able to be moved from pens or pastures to a treatment area and through the treatment chute with a minimum amount of stress to both the cattle and the producer. The treatment area should be easy to clean and should provide nonslip flooring in the crowding pens, alleys, chutes and chute exits.

Slow and quiet

Because cattle react on impulse to fear and are dangerous when frightened, they should be moved in ways that prevent them from becoming agitated. Cattle are herd animals and tend to become fearful when left alone.

Strategies to minimize fear include moving cattle slowly and quietly and always moving them in small groups. Do not use dogs to move cattle in confinement (this can't be stressed enough — leave the dogs penned up at the house), and minimize the use of electric prods.

Because cattle balk at moving or flapping objects, crowding pens, single-file alleys and loading ramps should be constructed with solid sides so that cattle can't see outside the working facility.

Once the cattle approach the working facility, don't overcrowd them. Never fill the crowding pen completely full; rather, fill it to one-half to three-quarters capacity only. Do not "crush" the calves with the crowd gate to force them into the single-file alley (sometimes referred to as a lead-up alley or a snake). The crowd gate should be used to follow the cattle, not to shove up against them. Cattle should have room to move around in the crowding pen with the only

visible route of escape being the alley.

If a lone animal refuses to move, release it and bring it back with another group. Take no more animals than the lead-up alley will hold. An animal left alone in a crowding pen will become agitated and may attempt to jump the fence to rejoin its herdmates.

The alley

Single-file working alleys should be adjustable for width or more narrow at the bottom than at the top so that different-sized animals can be worked in the same facility without their being able to turn around. Solid-sided, curved, working alleys (single-file alleys) take advantage of cattle's natural circling behavior and prevent cattle from seeing the squeeze chute and the people working at the chute until they are almost caught.

A catwalk along the inside of the curved alley will force the handler to stand in the best position for moving the animal and will let the animal circle away from the handler. Never have an overhead catwalk.

Cattle are motivated to maintain visual contact with each other. Each animal should be able to see others ahead of it. Make single-file lead-up alleys at least 20 feet (ft.) long (30-50 ft. for larger facilities).

Don't force an animal into the alley unless it has a place to go. Blocking gates in the alley need to be "see-through" so cattle can see the animals ahead of them. A solid blocking gate just ahead of the squeeze chute prevents cattle from seeing what's happening in the squeeze. If a calf sees a dead end it will balk. Wait until the single-file chute to the squeeze chute is almost empty before refilling it.

Visual cues

Cattle have excellent wide-angle vision (in excess of 300 degrees) due to the widely set position of their eyes. They can see behind themselves — except directly behind their rear — without turning their heads.

While cattle do have depth perception, they have difficulty perceiving depth at ground level when their heads are raised. To see depth near the ground, a calf has to lower its head, perhaps explaining why cattle balk at ground-level distractions.

Because contrasting patterns caused by fence or panel shadows will cause balking, lighting considerations are important for moving cattle smoothly. In addition, cattle that are in the dark will move toward a dim light, but they tend to balk if they have to look into the sun or a bright light. Calves may refuse to enter a dark, indoor working alley from a bright, outside crowding pen. Extend the alley outside the building or cover the crowding area.

Safety considerations

To protect people who are handling cattle, the corrals, working facilities and chutes must be in good repair and must match the operation and cattle. Gate latches and latches on the squeeze chute (headcatch and squeeze) must have scheduled, proper maintenance, because slipped latches are very dangerous.

All persons using the squeeze chute should know where the pinch points are, as well as the arc of movement of squeeze bars and headcatch handles. Pipes slid behind cattle to serve as a backstop are dangerous. An animal moving either forward or backward rapidly before the pipe is fully engaged can trap a person between the pipe and the side of the alley or chute.

And to prevent being injured directly by an animal, do not get into the crowding pen or single-file alley with cattle.

Stand back and look for danger points such as levers at head height or foot-operated chute controls that may trip the operator. Occasionally walk around and through the working facility to inspect for sharp edges, broken pipes, loose bolts, etc. — anything that might cause injury to an animal or to the operator.

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