

What's the Hold-Up?

When cattle are uncooperative, think about stockmanship that promotes cattle flow.

by Troy Smith, field editor

A commercial Angus producer recently shared a tale of woe that might summon sympathy from many cattle folk. According to his story, this cattle producer had implemented an artificial insemination (AI) program requiring heat detection followed by the twice-daily process of identifying and inseminating receptive females. From the beginning, things had not gone well — not because of anything specifically related to AI, but because of cattle behavior.

It couldn't be blamed on the working facilities. Our producer sought professional advice when designing the pens and processing area, and they've been kept in good repair ever since. The outfit was shorthanded, though, and the small crew pressed into service had little livestock handling expertise and even less enthusiasm.

It didn't help the weather was hot, with air temperatures climbing early in the day and persisting until late evening. Most frustrating to the producer was the way the cattle seemed to become increasingly uncooperative.

The process was plagued by one hold-up after another. Targeted animals were hard to sort from the group and many balked or fussed

their way through the lead-up alley and into the breeding barn. The producer admitted similar things had occasionally happened during other processing events, but this experience was the worst. To his credit, he knew it shouldn't be that way.

The goal of any conscientious stockman should be to perform needed livestock management practices without inflicting excessive stress on the animals or the handlers. Minimizing stress is the humane way to go, and it makes economic sense. Increased interest in low-stress stockmanship has brought considerable attention to working facility design and emphasis on enhancing what Ron Gill refers to as "flow."

Establishing flow

A Texas A&M AgriLife Extension livestock specialist, Gill often uses that term to describe the



desirable movement of cattle through a working facility. Well-designed facilities allow cattle to flow naturally. However, not even the fanciest facility comes with a guarantee of success. Failure to apply proper cattle handling techniques can disrupt the flow. Sometimes, handlers don't really understand how to get it started.

"The ability to establish flow is the most important part of effective stockmanship," Gill says. "If you can start and manage cattle flow so they move through a system smoothly, you can get a lot done in a short amount of time. Smooth is fast, without hurrying."

Gill favors the term "effective stockmanship" when describing the objective of educational events he and Montana rancher Curt Pate conduct. Gill and Pate are co-clinicians for Stockmanship & Stewardship, a producer education program created by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and supported by Merck Animal Health as well as the beef checkoff.

How can producers use effective stockmanship to avoid situations that hold up the flow? Gill and Pate offer advice applicable to different phases of cattle work, starting with the gather and progressing through the pen-work of sorting and eventually processing individual animals. Both clinicians agree the handlers' first contact with the cattle often sets the tone for all that follows. Work purposefully but quietly, without a lot of commotion.

Gathering and sorting

When gathering pasture cattle and moving them to a set of pens, Pate advises handlers to first get all of the cattle pointed in the same direction. Get their minds started

Use pressure to control flow

Effective stockmanship skills are based on pressure and release. The cattle handler uses his or her presence and position to apply pressure that initiates cattle movement and then adjusts position to direct that movement. Figuring out when and where to apply pressure, and when to release it, is key to achieving effective stockmanship. The kind of pressure used makes a difference, too. According to Curt Pate, there are three kinds.

"Driving pressure is just what it sounds like — the pressure used to move or drive cattle away from the handler," explains Curt Pate. "But drawing pressure is just the opposite. It's about asking an animal to move toward the handler."

Pate says drawing pressure can be used effectively in a confined area, such as a sorting alley, to get cattle to walk past the handler. After gaining an animal's attention, the handler can step back and draw the animal out of the group, which can then draw others to follow. Skilled stockmen often use certain animals to draw other animals into following the leader.

"Maintaining pressure is keeping the animal's attention without asking them to move. You're asking them to wait," adds Pate. "All three kinds of pressure work together when they're applied properly."

However, when the pressure, the timing or the position of the handler is incorrect, cattle don't respond as desired. Then the handlers become frustrated and resort to more forceful measures. Even though the handler may get the job done eventually, there likely will be consequences, including increased stress and negative effects on animal performance. In addition, cattle learn bad habits, which affect the way they respond to handling in the future.

"The real challenge is figuring out how much pressure to use," says Pate, noting that overemphasis on making it a low-stress experience sometimes results in handlers applying weak pressure, which is not effective.

"We need to learn how to apply appropriate pressure to create lively movement, but not panic," Pate adds. "It's a really important part of stockmanship."

in the direction you want them to go. To start movement, the handler creates a lead cow and sends her in that desired direction. Then, other cattle are sent toward the leader. Start the movement and let it build, taking advantage of the drawing pressure from the leader and applying driving pressure to establish a natural flow. When using driving pressure, remember a steeper angle of approach to the animal applies more pressure, while a flatter angle applies less.

Let the herd string out a little, and don't get too close. Avoid the common mistake of falling in directly behind the herd and pushing. Pate reminds handlers cattle can't see what is directly behind them without turning their heads.

"Getting behind cattle changes their minds to focus on us instead of where they're going. They slow down or stop to turn and see us," Pate explains. "A great way to apply pressure that keeps them moving is to move from one side to the other, zig-zagging back and forth so they can switch eyes and see us without turning their heads."

Sorting can be a frustrating and stressful process when cattle aren't comfortable walking past a handler in the sorting alley. According to Gill, it may save time and avoid stress if cattle are allowed to come by the handler a couple of times before the actual sorting begins.

He recommends handlers learn how to use drawing and driving

Continued on page 46

pressure when sorting. Hug the fence, avoid looking cattle directly in the eye, and figure out how and when to step forward, and step back to get the desired movement down an alley.

“Don’t fill a sorting alley too full, or the cattle in the back just get mashed,” Gill says, explaining how crowding in the back of the alley creates panic movement and disruptive pressure from the herd. “And don’t have too many people in the sorting alley, or cattle have to come by one, then another and maybe another handler. These are things that can increase stress and interfere with flow.”

Gill believes problems associated with putting cattle through a lead-up alley to a chute are best avoided by correct handling during gathering and sorting. Cattle need to be calm and responsive. Just like during sorting, animals must be willing to walk by a handler to move through a Bud Box and into a lead-up alley.

Gill likes having a sliding gate at the Bud Box’s entry to the lead-up alley, but problems can arise if it is not open when cattle are brought into the Bud Box.

Flow disruptions

“Cattle learn to flow through a system, but they have to have a place to go,” Gill says. “Problems can occur with sweeps (crowding tubs) designed so you push cattle in through the back and out through the front with the sweep gate. Although, some sweeps are designed to work like a Bud Box (where cattle go in and turn back the way they came to see the lead-up alley entrance). I think they are better.”



“We should be having fun when we’re working cattle. If you’re not having fun, you’re doing something wrong.” — Curt Pate

Gill says hold-ups in flow often occur because handlers overload their Bud Box or sweep tub, as well as the lead-up alley. Overcrowding interferes with flow and handlers applying excessive pressure, making it worse. Pate agrees, explaining cattle standing in a lead-up alley received push-back pressure from the chute activity.

“With fewer animals in the lead-up alley, it’s easier to apply the correct pressure to keep cattle flowing. You can have too few animals, too; I think we need at least three,” Pate says. “And we need to remember where to apply pressure, focusing on the lead animal and letting its movement draw the next animals forward.”

Gill notes how chute operation can create drawing pressure, too. If the rear gate is opened as one animal exits the chute, the following animal can be drawn forward. However, drawing pressure can be overcome and flow stalled if there is too much

activity chuteside. Flow is easily disrupted by too many people in the wrong place.

Producers are sometimes warned against other out-of-place objects or distractions that might cause animals to balk instead of flowing through a working system. Gill says changes in footing and areas of contrasting light, such as bright spots or shadows at entrances to enclosed areas or lead-up alleys, can interrupt flow.

However, he doesn’t worry much about things like a coat left hanging on the fence or discarded candy wrappers on the ground.

“Unless cattle are pretty wild, that Styrofoam™ cup in the alley is just going to get

tromped in,” he says. “If cattle booger at that sort of thing, there may be other issues. It’s probably a symptom of a bigger problem, and not the cause of a hold-up in flow.”

When cattle processing events are plagued by disruptions in flow — and especially if it happens with increasing frequency — Gill and Pate suggest the fault seldom belongs to the cattle. Producers who dread working cattle should consider that a handler’s attitude has an effect. Remember animals respond to the level of stockmanship exhibited by their handlers, and they learn from it. Every time cattle are handled, it’s a training session, for better or worse.

“We should be having fun when we’re working cattle,” Pate says. “If you’re not having fun, you’re doing something wrong.” 