

Safety First

When Doug and Mary Ellen Hicks designed the new working facility at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, they knew student and cattle safety had to be their priority.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

On Aug. 19, when students filed in for their first cattle-handling lab, Mary Ellen Hicks wasted no time in letting them know where her priorities lie.

“Your safety is our number one concern,” she emphasized.

Animal science professor and veterinarian at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), Hicks has her work cut out for her, as does her husband, Doug, manager of the school beef unit.

“Not every student has a cattle background,” Doug observes. During a week’s time, as many as 150 students come to the facility for labs. Some have never been close to a cow. There are also two student workers and

three volunteers at the 83-cow beef unit.

That means in 2010, when the Hickses got the green light to design a new beef facility at the Tifton, Ga., campus, there was one key phrase.

“Safety and stress reduction,” states Mary Ellen.

Proponents of low-stress cattle handling, the Hickses feel that keeping the stress level at a minimum for cattle, including keeping them comfortable, translates into low-stress, safe working conditions for the cattle and students.



► Doug and Mary Ellen Hicks made student and cattle safety a priority when they designed the beef unit at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

The old facility was a reminder of what they didn’t want. While no students or cattle were seriously injured there, it is a testament to the couple’s supervision and cattle savvy. A dilapidated milking barn built in the 1950s housed a small pen, the lead up and squeeze chute. Two more holding pens were outside.

Cattle savvy still counts in safety

While Doug and Mary Ellen Hicks couldn’t be more proud of the 4-year-old working facility at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), they both say working cattle safely isn’t all about the facility.

“You can get the oldest, most ramshackle pen and a good cowboy will make working cattle look easy,” says Mary Ellen, animal science professor and veterinarian, “and I’ve seen students create a disaster in this.”

Ron Gill, extension livestock specialist at Texas A&M, agrees. “The only way to keep people from getting hurt is to create a situation where they don’t come in contact with the cattle. That isn’t ever going to be the case.”

If you do find yourself in the same situation as the Hickses, and have to work cattle with inexperienced help, learn from their and Gill’s experience.

► Less is more.

“Have as few people around as possible,” says Doug Hicks, head of the ABAC beef unit.

“The more people around, the more cattle have to focus on,” agrees Mary Ellen.

► Find the right person for the job.

“People who understand cattle behavior are much less likely to get hurt,” says Gill. “They get hurt when cattle run back toward them or kick a gate or them. That happens when you apply pressure in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Cattle people tend to put the wrong person at the wrong job, says Gill. “Understanding cattle behavior is the key. You don’t put somebody in a position where they aren’t trained for it. Put the more experienced people in the back bringing cattle up. We often do it backward and put the less experienced helpers in the back because we think it takes less skill. That isn’t the case.”

► Plan an escape route.

“Create an easy escape,” says Gill. “If there are solid sides people can’t climb the fence. That lends itself to somebody getting hurt.”

► Slow is better.

“Don’t get in a hurry,” says Mary Ellen. “The cattle will go everywhere and nothing will work right.”

► Practice makes perfect.

Gill suggests letting inexperienced cattle handlers practice on calm, user-friendly cattle first.

“We have a beginner herd and a university herd,” says Mary Ellen. “Our beginner herd is made up of calm, quiet cattle. Once students get more skill handling cattle, we let them work on the cattle with a little ear.”

She adds, “Docility is so important to us. If the cattle don’t adapt, we find them another home.” Cattle savvy still counts in safety.

Cattle and students were stuck outside in the rain and sweltering South Georgia sun. The worst, though, was the concrete floor. "It was rough on their hooves," Doug says. Plus, as the cattle deposited urine and manure on the concrete, it got slick. "It scared the cattle." When he was finally able to get recycled tire mats for the heavy-use areas, he said the cattle would voluntarily stand on them for relief. "I hated being on that concrete," says Mary Ellen, "and there were no lights." "I don't see how we did it," says Doug. "It worked, but you had to watch what you were doing," Mary Ellen adds. "We were looking for something that would lower the stress on the cattle and us."

Fitting the bill

During the Deep South Stocker tour in August 2010, they found a working facility they thought would fit the bill at Outz Cattle Co. Caylor Outz is an order buyer and preconditions cattle at his Cairo, Ga., facility, and also uses it for his cow-calf operation.

Using Outz' facility as a guide, Doug, along with Stan Graham of Graham Livestock Systems, started drawing up the plans with input from Mary Ellen.

"The first thing I said is I wanted a 4-inch-by-12-inch pitch to the roof," she says. "That is standard in horse facilities. The steeper the better for air movement." There is also a cap vent on the roof, as well as fiberglass panels to let in more light.

"It is 10° to 15° cooler in here than it is outside," says Mary Ellen. "It is so light and airy." The couple also made sure there was ample fluorescent lighting.

"We did a C-section out here at night," she remarks.

At its lowest clearance the roof is 12 feet (ft.), and 26 ft. at its highest.

"We wanted to get in there with a tractor," says Doug. "We could turn it into a hay barn if needed."

Then there is the floor — a far cry from the slick concrete of the old facility. The clay base is covered with 6 inches (in.) to 8 in. of crusher run limestone.

"It is softer and easier on their hooves," says Doug.

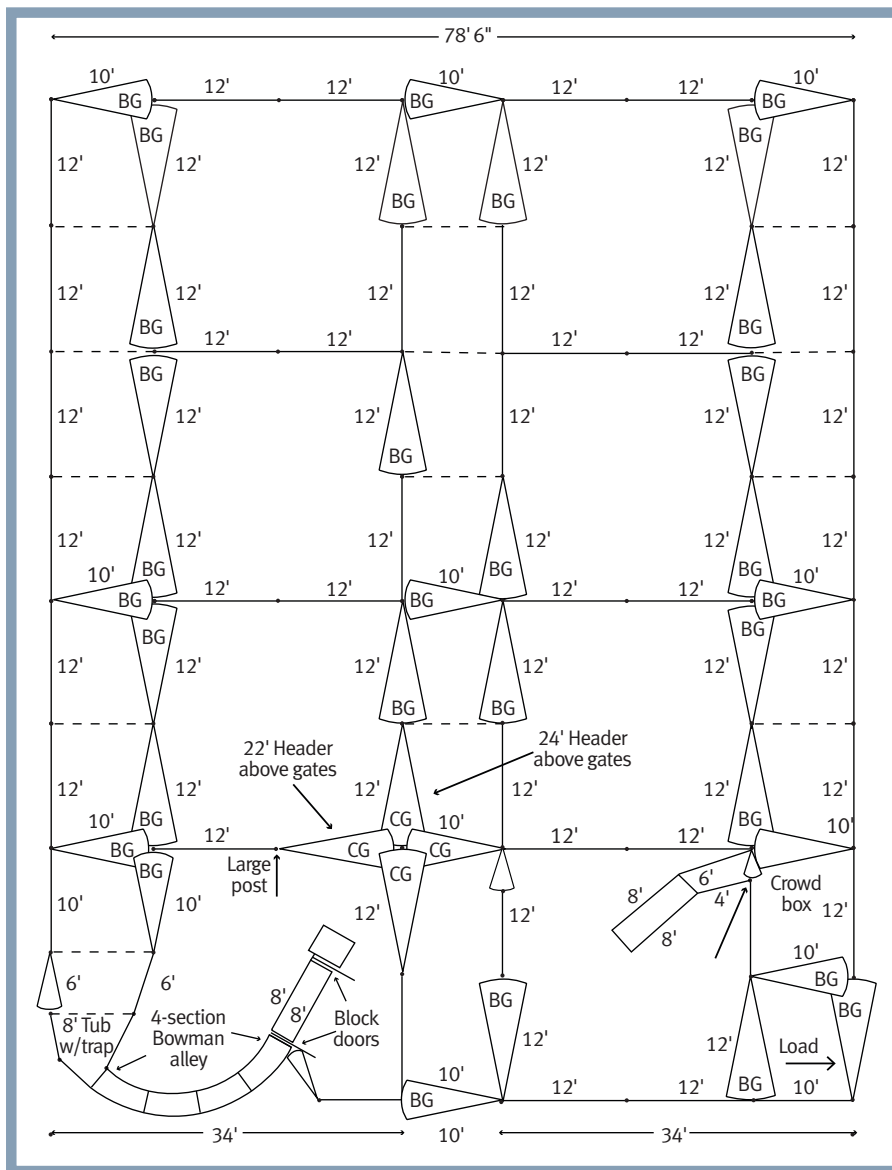
Mary Ellen adds, "The drainage is good. The urine puddles disappear, and the floor is light. Everything is light. You can see things."

There are also pens, three 24 × 24-foot (ft.) pens on each side with a 10-ft. alleyway down the middle and a 10-ft. alley on each side of the 78.6 × 96-ft. facility.

"There are plenty of pens and ways to sort," says Doug. Gates, too — there are 37 12-ft. gates.

"I love gates," says Mary Ellen. "We can cut and sort any way in here."

Fig. 1: Plan for the beef unit at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College



CONTINUED ON PAGE 114

Safety First CONTINUED FROM PAGE 113

Even better, they have self-catching latches. Ron Gill, extension livestock specialist at Texas A&M University, says, “If the gates don’t latch quickly and securely, people can get hurt. I like self-catch latches.”

He says, however, that they sometimes aren’t as secure and comments, “I like a second latch on top.”

At each gate, there is 9.5 ft. of clearance under the header bars, so once again, there is room for either a tractor or a person on a horse to get under them.

There is also a tub and alleyway leading up to the squeeze chute. While the Hickses are fans of a Bud Box, Mary Ellen says, “With a Bud Box, the cattle have to move. Our cattle are so calm they are hard to move. Plus, the person working the Bud Box has to be able to read the cattle. They have to know where to put their body. Both systems work, it just depends on who is doing the work.”

As for the squeeze chute, Doug says, “The tire mats were my favorite thing out here until we got the Silencer chute. It is the greatest thing ever invented.”

Mary Ellen is a fan, too, and adds, “It holds their heads really nicely.”

Like any facility and design, after four years of use the couple say there are a few places they’d change. “The gates going down the aisle only allow the cattle to flow in one direction,” says Doug.

Mary Ellen says, “At certain times of the day, there are shadows and bright spots that spook the cattle.” Set on a north-south axis, she says it would be that way no matter how they positioned it. “It is also so open the cattle get distracted by traffic on the road.”

There are also bars on top of the tub and lead up to the squeeze chute. If a cow goes down, Doug says they would have to get a welding torch and cut them away to get her out.

“No place is perfect,” Mary Ellen notes. “We couldn’t be more proud of this. It is so comfortable. The cows aren’t hunting a way to get out. If we leave a gate open, they come in on their own. We’ve even had them open a gate and come in to lounge around.”

“It is such a blessing. It has made life a whole lot better,” she says. And safer.



► Doug Hicks, head of the beef unit at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, says the Silencer chute and mats made from recycled tires are two of his favorite things ever.

Angus breeders boost program

While there are red and white cows, some with a bit of Brahman, at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), they are a teaching tool.

“We try to keep a little ear so the students can see something different,” says Mary Ellen Hicks, animal science professor and veterinarian.

However, the majority of the herd is Angus, with some cows being almost 100% Angus.

“We retain ownership on all our steers through the Georgia Beef Challenge,” says Mary Ellen.

“We use Angus for the carcass quality and temperament,” adds her husband, Doug, head of the ABAC beef unit.

Angus breeders throughout the South did help, and are helping, turn the herd black by donating semen and the use of bulls.

“Southern Cattle Company started it years ago with their Angus program,” says Doug.

“Roland Starnes has helped us all along,” says Mary Ellen. Now manager at Frank Turner and Sons in Hayneville, Ala., Starnes has even loaned them bulls from his personal herd.

“Jonathan Perry has really gotten with our program,” Mary Ellen adds. Manager at Deer Valley Farm in Fayetteville, Tenn., Perry loans bulls to the school during breeding season.

Mary Ellen says commercial producers near the Tifton, Ga., campus have figured out quality Angus bulls come to the program and line up to buy them when breeding season is over.

“It is great,” says Doug. “We have limited pasture space, and we don’t even have to keep a bull after breeding season.”

The college beef program also makes use of donated Angus semen. They breed all the replacement heifers to calving-ease bulls, then breed half of the mature herd by artificial insemination (AI) before turning in clean-up bulls. Jan Tulp, an Angus breeder from Lake City, Fla., helped that cause when he donated a semen tank. Paul Bennett at Knoll Crest Farm in Red House, Va., donated semen from his bull, KCR Bennett Homestead.

Now, Angus breeders are going even farther by participating in ABAC’s internship program. Student Jacob Gibb is headed to Yon Family Farms in Ridge Spring, S.C., for more hands-on experience.