



Vet Call

► by **Bob Larson**, Kansas State University

Cattle-handling facilities

Many animal health interventions require that cattle be gathered to a handling facility that allows individual animals to be separated from the rest of the herd and confined in a squeeze chute. In situations where all the cattle in a pasture or pen are healthy and are going to be handled to give animal health products, such as vaccines or parasite control, or to monitor body condition score or pregnancy status, the facilities have to be large enough to accommodate all the cattle in the group.

Facility design

When a few cattle from the herd need to be examined or treated for disease, the facilities have to allow safe and efficient separation of the desired animals from the rest of the herd and then adequate restraint in a squeeze chute to allow access for close inspection of areas on the animal's body that require treatment. Cattle should be able to be moved from the pasture or pen to the working area and through the handling facilities with a minimum of stress

to both the cattle and producer. Working-facility design is based on knowledge of cattle behavior, and research to better understand cattle behavior and to design optimum working facilities is becoming common.

Because cattle are prey animals and can easily react to contact with people and dogs with a "fight or flight" response, it is important to prevent cattle from becoming agitated when being handled. 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 cattle in small groups. Do not use dogs to move cattle in confinement, and minimize the use of electric cattle prods.

Because cattle balk at moving or flapping objects, the crowding pens, single-file alley and loading ramp should be monitored to make sure that nothing within the line of sight could cause them to react. As cattle are moved from the pasture or pen toward the working facility, do not overcrowd them. Never fill the crowd pen — rather only add enough cattle to be about one-half of capacity, and then do not "crush" the cattle with the crowd gate to force them into the single-file alley (also called a snake). The crowd gate is used to follow the cattle, not to

shove up against them. Cattle should have room to move around in the crowd 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.

Field of vision

Cattle have excellent wide-angle vision (in excess of 300°) due to the wide position of their eyes and can see behind themselves without turning their heads. While cattle do

have depth perception, they have difficulty seeing the size and shape of objects at ground level when their heads are raised. To see depth near the ground, cattle have to lower their head, perhaps explaining why cattle balk at distractions at ground level.

Because contrasting patterns caused by fence or panel shadows will cause balking, lighting considerations are important for moving cattle smoothly through handling facilities. In addition, cattle in the dark area will move toward a dim light, but they tend to balk if they have to look into the sun or a bright light. Because cattle may refuse to enter a dark, indoor working alley from a bright, outside crowding pen, it may be necessary to extend the alley outside the building or to cover the crowding area to prevent sharp contrasts in lighting that cause cattle to balk at important points in the handling facility.

Cattle like to maintain visual contact with each other, so in most situations, the single-file alley leading up to the squeeze chute should be at least 20 feet (ft.) long (30 ft.-50 ft. for larger facilities) to allow each animal to see others ahead of it. Don't force an animal into a single-file alley unless it has a place to go. If cattle see a dead end, they will most likely balk. Therefore, blocking gates in a

single-file alley need to be "see through" so cattle can see the animals ahead.

To protect all the people 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, and the arc of movement of squeeze bars and headcatch handles.

Pipes slid behind cattle to serve as a back stop are dangerous because 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.

To prevent being injured directly by an animal, do not get in the crowding area or alley. Also, the working area should be easy to clean and provide nonslip flooring in the crowd pens, alleys, chutes and the exit from the chute.

While good working facility design, construction and maintenance are important for safe and efficient cattle handling, the people handling the cattle probably have the greatest impact on the level of stress inflicted on the cattle and handlers and the ease that cattle move through a facility.

Develop skills

Most cattle producers know of people who handle cattle particularly well (as well as people at the opposite extreme). We use terms like cow sense, common sense or stockmanship to describe people who are able to observe cattle behavior accurately and then respond to that behavior so cattle move exactly where the handler wants them to move. Although there may be some innate personality traits or skills that make some people naturally better cattle handlers, good cattle-handling training that emphasizes unlearning bad habits and learning low-stress cattle-handling habits can benefit anyone who routinely works with cattle.

It is easy to recognize that handling cattle is required for many, if not most, animal health procedures. For health and production management interventions to provide the greatest benefit to a cattle herd, the cattle must be handled through good facilities quietly, efficiently and with minimal stress.

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