Everyone involved in beef cattle production will at some time work cattle. Sound handling practices will impact the well-being of cattle, individual animal health and herd productivity. These practices are the result of decades of practical experience, research and, most important, common sense. Unfortunately, working cattle can be a source of stress for you and your cattle. Stressed cattle will have poor performance and a greater risk of health problems than non-stressed cattle. Minimizing stress is as simple as “making the right thing easy and the wrong thing hard.” Good handling techniques as well as functional facilities will more often than not actually save time and money. You will pay for handling facilities whether you own them or not!

The following points on handling and the use of cattle handling facilities will make working cattle easier for you and your animals.

Have a Plan

Have a plan for working cattle. Know what you are going to do long before you get cattle up. A simple list of what you are doing, the tools you need and what cattle you are working is a start. Look at the overall flow pattern of cattle through the facility. Walk through the facilities, making sure everything is working, and are free from obstructions. Obstructions can be as simple as a closed gate or a coat hanging on the fence. Mud holes, drains, step-ups, shadows and “zebra” lighting are also obstructions to smooth cattle flow. Cattle will work better and have less chance of injury if they can keep their footing, so make sure alleys are not slick with mud or manure.

Have enough skilled labor to carry out your plan. Inexperienced people are easily frightened by cattle and may be hurt if they do not understand cattle behavior. It helps if your workers/helpers know what they are doing and what you expect.
Anything new or different causes cattle to become nervous and can lead to handling difficulty or production losses. That is why cattle work better when they are handled more frequently. Allow cattle to become familiar with the working pens by occasionally feeding in the pens or placing mineral feeders near the working area.

Weather can have a significant impact on cattle and human stress. While we cannot control the weather, we can plan activities around weather norms. It can get very hot and muggy mid-day in the summer across Alabama. Avoid known periods of high temperature as you plan to work cattle. Watch the weather forecast. A heat index of 100 or greater is dangerous for cattle and humans. A heat index of 100 may be a temperature of 85° and 90% relative humidity, or a temperature of 90° and relative humidity of 60%. While Alabama is not known for cold winters, unseasonably cold temperatures can also cause problems with stress. Try to avoid working cattle during or after a major cold front.

Understand cattle behavior

A good plan will work only if you follow it. When you start moving cattle, make sure they are going where you want them to go. While this sounds a little obvious, cattle are known to run away when you enter a pasture. Now you get to convince them to turn around! Understanding your cattle's flight zone will help get things started correctly. The direction an animal moves depends on where you enter the flight zone. Cattle will move forward when you enter behind the shoulder, and backward when you enter in front of the shoulder. Entering the blind spot will cause the cattle to stop, turn and look at you. They want to know where you are at all times. In close quarters, you may be kicked if you get in a cow's blind spot.

How close can you get to your cows without them moving away? That distance is the flight zone (figure 1). Cattle will move when you enter their flight zone, and will stop when you leave it. The flight zone is larger when cattle are approached head-on, are excitable or when the cattle are not used to being handled. The flight zone is smaller when you confine the animal to a single-file chute or the animals are used to being handled. Knowing the flight zone will help you work cattle with less stress (figure 2).

Cattle are sensitive to sudden, loud or high-pitched noises. Excessive noise makes cattle nervous and more difficult to work. The effects of shouting and “banging” depend on the temperament or disposition of the cattle. Tame, timid cattle may show little negative reaction. Nervous, flighty cattle may end up in the next county after a well-intended shout. In metal working facilities, avoid metal-on-metal contact. Install rubber bumpers where gates clang against metal. Avoid unnecessary shouting or other noise when possible.
Cattle have a strong herd instinct and become nervous or aggressive when alone. It is best to work at least two or three animals at a time. It is also best to have a dominant animal in the group. The fate of a cattle drive was often determined by identifying the lead steer. Understanding this basic concept of cattle behavior alone will reduce the stress of handling.

There is a lot of discussion as to the best way to move cattle. Some are convinced working cattle on horseback is best, others think working on foot is better. Remember that cattle do not like anything new. They are creatures of habit. According to Temple Grandin (BEEF Magazine, August, 2009), cattle’s memories are sensory: pictures, sounds and smells. A person on a horse or 4-wheeler is different than a person on the ground.

In the tighter confines of a pen or alley plastic paddles, sorting flags or brooms can be used to move cattle. Each works off of sight or sound to get cattle to move. Sorting flags and brooms provide a visual barrier, plastic “rattle” paddles provide both the visual barrier and an audible noise. A sorting stick works as a subtle prod, much like a solid wall but easy to handle. None of these tools are designed to strike animals, nor should they be used that way. When used correctly, each can be a valuable tool for minimizing stress during handling.

**Avoiding Injury**

Many injuries to cattle or the people working cattle can be prevented by planning and understanding cattle behavior. Paying attention while working cattle will further reduce the incidence of injury.

Pay close attention to the facilities. Gate and panels can break or come loose, causing protruding objects, sharp corners, low overhangs or other traps that can harm animals or humans.

Cattle are large, strong and can be unpredictable. It is unwise to relax around them too much, or to try to work them without adequate facilities. Cattle are stronger than humans, and humans are smarter than cattle; therefore, humans should try to outthink cattle, not out-wrestle them. If available, use the catwalk along the cattle working or loading chutes to work cattle rather than standing behind them.

Stay alert when working cattle. Cattle usually become unruly when least expected. Make certain that everyone is cautious at all times. If workers become fatigued, it is best to rest for a while.

If cattle are to be worked in close quarters, either work close to the animal or stay out of kicking range. Cattle cannot kick hard when you are very close. This is not recommended, however, because the danger of being stepped on is greatly increased.

Cattle that are not properly restrained in good facilities can cause accidents by throwing their heads or kicking. This may result in dangerous,
painful jabs by vaccination needles, castration knives or implanting tools. It is also difficult to deliver precise dosages of vaccines, pour-on insecticides, dewormers or other products without good facilities. Improperly delivered product dosages can increase animal stress by inducing overdose reactions or, alternately, by not doing the proper job because too little product is delivered.

Many of the tools and products used in working cattle can be harmful if improperly used. Read and follow directions carefully. Accidental ingestion of chemicals by humans, spilling certain products (especially organophosphates) on the skin or in the eyes, or accidental injection can be stressful to people. If accidents happen, contact a physician immediately. Take the label with you so the physician can have full knowledge of the product which is causing the problem.

Have a first-aid kit available near the cattle working area. First-aid training is recommended to handle possible emergencies.

Summary

Careful planning, understanding cattle behavior and paying attention to details will reduce the stress associated with working cattle. When you start thinking about getting cattle up to work, remember:

✓ Have a plan
✓ Have enough skilled labor
✓ Make sure the facilities are ready
✓ The initial movement determines everything
✓ Don't get stressed yourself!

For more information on the Alabama Beef Quality Assurance program, visit www.alabamabqa.com.
Figure 1. Flight zone

Taken from "The Cattle Industry’s Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Cattle", National Cattlemen’s Beef Association
Figure 2. Moving cattle

Taken from “The Cattle Industry’s Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Cattle”, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association