



Alabama Beef Quality Assurance: Using Handling Facilities Correctly

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Cattle handling facilities and an understanding of cattle behavior are essential for many health and management practices. Poor facilities or techniques increase the chances for hide and carcass blemishes and injury to the cattle and humans. Poor facilities and cattle handling practices also cause stress to the producer and cattle.

The following points on the use of cattle handling facilities will make working cattle easier for the producer and animals and ensure that the practices are carried out correctly.

Assess cattle flow. Look at the overall flow pattern of cattle through the facility. Avoid situations where cattle are caught in dead ends or where gate placement makes cattle movement difficult. Move cattle up a slope when possible and always try to move toward an outside light, so the animals think they are escaping. Also, avoid construction where zebra-like strips of light occur; this causes cattle to balk.

Move cattle into the chute easily. Construct the facility so cattle can be easily moved into the chute. Use gates to squeeze cattle into the chute.

Do not make the chute too wide. Chute width should be no greater than 26 inches (22 inches where only calves are worked). Cattle turning in the chute can cause stress on the animal and the handlers.

Have solid footing. Rough concrete or diamond-shaped grooved concrete chute floors work well. No matter what material is used, cattle will work better and have less chance of injury if they can keep their footing.

Avoid noise. Cattle are sensitive to sudden loud or high-pitched noises. Excessive noise makes cattle nervous and more difficult to work. In metal working facilities, install rubber bumpers where gates clang against metal. Avoid unnecessary shouting or other noise when possible.

Familiarize cattle with the facilities. 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 the cattle to become familiar with the working pens by occasionally feeding them in the pens or by placing mineral feeders near the working area.

Move cattle carefully. To minimize stress when moving cattle, producers must understand the flight zone. Cattle will move when a handler enters their flight zone and will stop when the handler leaves it. The flight zone is larger when cattle are approached head on, are excitable, or when the cattle are not used to handling. It is smaller when the animal is confined to a single-file chute or the animals are used to being handled.

The direction an animal moves depends on where a handler enters the flight zone. Cattle will move forward when approached behind the shoulder and backward when approached in front of the shoulder. A handler entering the blind spot will cause the cattle to stop, turn, and look at that person. They want to know where the person is at all times. Avoid the cow's blind spot; a handler may be kicked when in close quarters.

Avoid the use of electric prods with cattle whenever possible. If electric prods are used, use them wisely and sparingly. Applying prods to the side or back only confuses cattle. It is best to apply below the tailhead to get cattle to move forward. A good method for driving and sorting cattle is to use a broom or a paddle. Cattle seem to see a wider implement better and follow directions more readily if it is used rather than a stick or board.

Work cattle in groups. 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 one or two mature cows in the group if trying to work a group of young calves.

Call cattle rather than drive them. Train cattle to come to your shout or truck horn. This can be done by blowing your truck horn or shouting when feeding or providing salt to the cattle. Cattle are more likely to respond to a call in the morning or evening than in the heat of the day.

Prevent backing in a working chute. A means to keep cattle from backing in the chute will make cattle working easier. Various ideas work, from saloon-type doors to boards manually placed behind the cattle.

Use experienced people. Inexperienced people are easily frightened by cattle and may be hurt if they do not understand cattle behavior.

Treat cattle with respect. 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 outwrestle them.

Remove sharp objects. Avoid protruding objects, sharp corners, low overhangs or other traps that can harm humans or animals when working cattle.

Construct catwalks. A catwalk built along the cattle working chutes or loading chutes is a much better place from which to work cattle than standing behind them.

Watch for kicks. 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 a person is very close. This is not recommended, however, because the danger of being stepped on is greatly increased.

Keep alert. Stay alert when working cattle. Cattle usually choose to 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.

Sort cows away from calves. It is less stressful on the cattle and the sorter if cows are sorted away from calves instead of moving calves away from cows.

Use products carefully. 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.

Properly restrain cattle when working them. 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, wormers, or other products without good facilities. Improperly delivered product dosages may increase animal stress by inducing overdose reactions or, alternately, by not doing the proper job because too little product is delivered.

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

Summary

These tips should contribute to the safe and correct application of health and management practices as well as appropriate use of health products.

