

Alabama Beef Quality Assurance: Using Handling Facilities Correctly

► Understanding cattle behavior and the use of cattle handling facilities is essential for implementation of many health and management practices in beef cattle operations.

Safe and effective cattle handling is vital in the application of many routine cattle management practices, such as vaccinating, castrating, dehorning, implanting, and performing pregnancy exams. Poor facilities or handling techniques increase the chances of hide and carcass blemishes, injury to cattle and humans, and unnecessary stress to the producer and cattle.

The following recommendations regard the use of cattle handling facilities. Applying these practices will make working cattle easier for the producer and safer for the animals on the farm/ranch, and will help ensure that cattle management practices are carried out correctly.

Assess cattle flow. Look at the overall flow pattern of cattle moving through the facility. Avoid situations where cattle are caught in dead ends or where gate placement makes cattle movement difficult. Try to make it easy for cattle to move the way you want them to and difficult for them to go in the wrong direction. Move cattle up a slope when possible and always try to move toward an outside light so that the animals think they are escaping. Also avoid construction where zebra-like strips of light occur, as this causes cattle to balk and may limit ease of movement.

Move cattle into the chute easily. Construct the facility so that cattle easily can be moved into the working chute using gates, a sweep tub, or a Bud Box.

Do not make the chute too wide. Chute width should be no greater than 28 to 30 inches (22 inches where only calves are worked). Cattle turning in the chute can cause stress on the animal and the handlers and potentially lead to injury of both. For more information about facility dimensions, refer to *Alabama Beef Quality Assurance: Planning and Constructing Handling Facilities and Equipment* (Extension publication ANR-1282).

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



Avoid excessive and unnecessary noise. Cattle are sensitive to sudden loud or high-pitched noises. Excessive noise makes cattle nervous and more difficult to work. In metalworking 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.

Understand the flight zone and point of balance. The direction an animal moves depends on where a handler enters the flight zone (figure 1). 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.

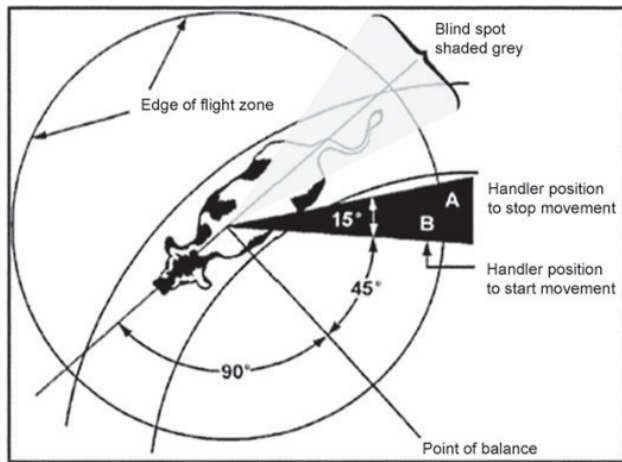


Figure 1. Understanding an animal's flight zone and point of balance and applying those concepts will make cattle handling easier.

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 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.

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 flag or a paddle, as cattle seem to see a wider implement more easily.

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 also is best to have one or two mature cows in the group if trying to work a group of young calves.

Whenever possible, call cattle rather than drive them. Train cattle to come to your voice or truck horn. This can be done by blowing your truck horn or calling 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. A small amount of feed on the back of the truck can attract the attention of the lead cows.

Consider the “pull and push” method. As the cattle are pulled by the lead person/truck/feed wagon, another individual pushes the backside of the group to keep them moving together. This method takes advantage of the herd instinct and keeps a tighter group. It is especially helpful to have a tighter group when moving cattle through a gate. When pulling cattle through a gate, imagine the cattle as a rope that you don't want to touch either side of the gate. Think carefully about the angle of the group as you approach a gate and maintain the correct angle until all cattle have come through.

Use the right gate opening. A gate that is too small will be viewed as a trap by the cattle. Extra space will prevent cattle from balking. This can be especially frustrating if the herd is gathered and refuses to go out a gate. The larger the herd, the larger the gate opening should be. Gates should swing in the direction of cattle movement or open flush with the fence to prevent a blind pocket.

Locate gates properly. Locating a properly sized gate for optimal animal and equipment movement can be one of the most important decisions you make. Gates that are in the middle of fences can be challenging to get cattle through, so consider how the fences can funnel cattle to a gate. Take measurements and plan on paper thoroughly.

Prevent backward movement in the working chute. Having a means to keep cattle from backing up in the chute will make cattle working easier. Various ideas work to prevent animals from moving backwards. Examples include poles manually placed behind the cattle or backup bars positioned in the working chute.

Use experienced people. Inexperienced people might be easily frightened by cattle and may be hurt if they do not understand cattle behavior. Sudden and unnecessary movements by inexperienced people also can have a negative effect on cattle behavior.

Treat cattle with respect. Cattle are large and strong and can be unpredictable. It is unwise to relax around them too much or 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 worked in close quarters, handlers should either work close to the animal or stay out of kicking range. Cattle cannot kick as hard when a person is very close. This is not recommended, however, because the danger of being stepped on is greatly increased. The best option is to stay out of kicking range as much as possible.

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 handler if cows are sorted away from calves instead of moving calves away from cows. Sorting cows away from calves is safer for the calves and ultimately allows for greater efficiency when working cattle since cows and calves frequently require different treatment regimens.

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 animal health products by humans, spilling certain products (especially organophosphates) on the skin or in the eyes, or accidental injection can be stressful

and potentially harmful to people. If accidents happen, contact a physician immediately. Take the product label with you so that the physician can have full knowledge of the product that 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 also is difficult to deliver precise dosages of vaccines, pour-on insecticides, dewormers, 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.

Practicing these handling tips will contribute to the safe and correct application of health and management practices as well as appropriate use of animal health products. For more information on cattle handling techniques, refer to *Low-Stress Cattle Handling* (Extension publication ANR-1394). For more information on cattle handling facility design and construction, refer to *Alabama Beef Quality Assurance: Planning and Constructing Handling Facilities and Equipment* (Extension publication ANR-1282).



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