

Cattle Handling Facilities Are Safety Equipment

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Beef operations regardless of size - 1 cow or 1000 cows or stockers - must have well designed handling facilities which have two functions. These functions are # 1 people safety and protection and # 2 cattle control, handling and safety. Most accidents and injuries to people and cattle are the result of inadequate, poorly designed pens, alleys and equipment that could be easily avoided. These are also the same reasons why cattle are always hard to handle in some handling facilities. Whether producers have only one or a thousand head, they must have some way to catch them to treat them when they get sick and to load them when you want to sell them.

Saving a few dollars by cutting corners in corral design or equipment is usually at the expense of people's safety and their cattle's safety. Eventually, those few dollars plus hundreds or thousands more are spent in the hospital emergency room on broken arms, legs, ribs and/or fingers and in some instances on funerals. The costs of emergency vet calls for seriously injured animals and/or the cost of dead animals also more than make up the difference between bad working facilities and cost of doing it right the first time. Properly designed, well-made working facilities and good equipment are an investment that should last 15-20 years or longer. The basic components of any good set of working pens and equipment are:

- Pens
- Alley
- Sweep Pen
- Crowding Alley
- Palpation Cage
- Squeeze Chute
- Headgate
- Loading Chute
- Covered Work Area
- Work Table
- Electricity
- Water

However, they do not have to be very elaborate, expensive or permanent. You may not even have to own this equipment. Many county cattlemen's associations own a squeeze chute, calf table and portable corral panels which they rent to their members for only a few dollars a day.

Corral Design - Pens, Alleys, Sweep Pen and Crowding Alley

Keep corral design simple. At least two pens are needed - one for capturing animals from the pasture and one for holding animals before treatment. This pen should be connected to the pasture so that a fence and the pens or another fence angle into the corral gate so cattle can be crowded into this pen. This "wing" makes a world of difference in how easy it will be to pen cattle. This pen opens into an alley for pushing animals into the crowding alley and chute. The chute and squeeze chute with headgate should be located in a second pen where animals are treated and missed animals cannot get away without being treated. Never build a corral with the chute opening directly back into the pasture. The larger your herd the more pens you probably will need for sorting and for sick pens. The crowding alley or chute must be accessible to trailers and trucks for loading animals going to the vet and to market.

The corral should have a alley with a maximum width of 12 ft. leading into the chute and rounded not square corners for cattle to go around. One person can move cattle in a 12 ft. wide alley while wider alleys require at least

two people to move cattle. Forcing crowded cattle around a square corner is much more difficult and produces many unnecessary bruises, scratches and other injuries to animals' shoulders, sides and hips. Subdividing this alley with gates will also give you some handy, small pens for sorting. The last section leading into the crowding alley should connect to a curved sweep pen or narrow down to a 30 in. gated-opening into the chute. A curved sweep pen saves a lot of wear and tear on people and cattle because you do not have to get in the pen to push them into the crowding alley. All you have to do is push the swing gate up more and more.

Working pens, whether wood or metal or home-made or purchased, should be a minimum of 6 ft. high. Unless an animal is the world's craziest fool, animals do not even try to jump out or climb over 6 ft. high pens because they cannot see over the top or hook their chin over the top. In contrast, pens only 5 ft. high do not present much of a challenge for even the smallest cow from getting out if she wants out and bulls are even worst. If an animal can hook his or her chin over the top of pen, it can get out. Do not waste your time and money on 5 ft. high corrals.

There are many choices of what to make a set of working pens out of - wood, pipe, guard rail, heavy-duty bull panels, etc. They can be permanent or portable. If they are portable, the panels should be heavy-duty so they have rigidity and strength. Lightweight 1 in. or less pipe or square tubing panels are too flimsy, cannot take any wear and tear, and are unsafe for people and cattle. Do not waste your money. Be careful around portable corrals made of metal rails that are open on the bottom of the rails, unless you do not mind being stung by wasps and yellow jackets every time you get within 20 ft. of it.

Squeeze Chutes, Headgates, Calf Tables and Loading Chutes

The center of activity in any cattle corral is at the end of the chute alley - where the squeeze chute with headgate, calf table or loading chute are located. It's also where 99.9% of all people and cattle injuries and deaths occur - most of which could be avoided.

A squeeze chute is essential when working cattle. You can easily spend the price for one in a hospital emergency room for broken arms, ribs and/or legs or more even more life threatening injuries. When buying a squeeze chute, always get the largest, longest size. It should also have a palpation cage so you can pregnancy test your cows or can pull a calf. When you have to vaccinate, deworm, castrate and dehorn small calves less than 400 lbs., a calf table can almost be worth its weight in gold in the time and the wear and tear on people and calves it saves.

Heavy-duty, adjustable, walk-through, self-catching or scissor-type steel headgates with handles that are out of your way are without question the safest for people and cattle. These headgates catch animals by the sides of the neck so they minimize the possibility of animals choking. In contrast, most home-made wooden and purchased guillotine-type headgates are serious accidents waiting to happen. They are "man killers" and "cow killers". Both have a bad habit of hitting someone either on the top or side of the head or busting someone with a uppercut to the jaw or chin. Almost every year you hear about someone getting killed by one of these headgates.

Guillotine headgates catch an animal's head with a bar coming down on the animal's neck and his throat caught by the permanent bottom, unmovable bottom of the headgate. Because of this design, an animal is in very serious danger and can choke to death in very few seconds when his front feet slip out from under him.

When you need to take an animal to the vet or the market, you have to have some way to get that animal onto the stock trailer or truck.

If you have a stock trailer, usually you do not need a loading chute. However, if the trailer is more than a 12 in. off the ground or will be loading a truck, an adjustable height loading chute is essential.

Roof Over Work Area, Work Table, Electricity and Water

In a permanent set of corral, a roof over the work area, electricity and running water are real handy conveniences. During rain, snow or 105 degree summer days, a roof over your head with lights is real nice when you have to treat a calf or cow, pull a calf in the middle of the night or artificially breed a cow. A work table saves a lot of wear on your back during a day of working calves. Also in a permanent set of corrals, put the squeeze chute, palpation cage, chute and sweep pen on a concrete pad so you do not have to slosh around in the mud. Frequently, you need water close by for surgical procedures, cleaning up equipment and yourself, and for sick animals that you have to keep penned up for a few days of treatment.

If you have only a few cows, you really cannot afford a set of corrals, a good squeeze chute or a calf table. So, you and other small producers in your community may want to consider going together and purchasing this equipment. Also,

many county cattlemen's associations have portable corral, squeeze chutes and calf tables which they rent to their members at very reasonable rates.

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