

Cattle Working Facilities



UofA **DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE**
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Cattle Working Facilities

by Tom R. Troxel and Shane Gadberry

Working facilities and handling equipment are needed for every cattle operation. Essential parts of the working facilities include (1) cattle pens, (2) crowding pen, (3) working alley, (4) squeeze chute and headgate and (5) loading chute. Several optional items to consider are (1) scales, (2) palpation cage and (3) calf tilt table. The optional items can be built in with the working facilities and equipment or added as needed.

The primary purposes of cattle working facilities and equipment are to provide a fast and efficient way to handle and work cattle, provide safe working conditions for people and cattle and provide the means to perform necessary cattle management practices. Management practices and activities ranging from vaccination of the herd to loading cattle into trailers or trucks are easier with a good set of cattle working facilities.

No particular facility design can be considered best. Design will vary with the type of cattle (calves versus cow-calf, large versus small cattle, etc.), size of the cattle operation, space restrictions and personal preferences on facility layout. Some commercial alleys and tubs are designed to easily adjust to accommodate calves or mature cows.

Individual parts of the working facilities will be discussed in separate sections. Each section will discuss the design needs of that part of the working facilities and some of the problems often seen in the field.

More discussion will be devoted to working chutes, squeeze chutes and headgates because they are the most vital parts of the facilities in terms of actual work performed on cattle. Also, under field

conditions, more time and effort can be expended with those items due to poor design, selection and maintenance.

General Principles to Consider When Planning a Cattle Working Facility

Cattle Vision

Cattle have a wide-angle vision field in excess of 300 degrees. Loading ramps and handling chutes should have solid walls to prevent animals from seeing distractions outside the working area. Seeing moving objects and people through the sides of a chute can cause cattle to balk or become frightened. Solid walls are especially important if animals are not completely tame or if they are unaccustomed to the facility.

Cattle have a tendency to move from dark areas to lighter areas, provided the light is not glaring. A spotlight directed onto a ramp or other apparatus will often facilitate entry. Handling facilities should be painted one uniform color because cattle are more likely to balk at a sudden change in color.

Hearing

Loud noises should be avoided in cattle handling facilities. However, small amounts of noise can be used to assist in moving livestock. Placing rubber stops on gates and squeeze chutes and positioning the hydraulic pump and motor away from a hydraulic squeeze chute will help reduce noise. It is also beneficial to pipe exhausts from pneumatic-powered equipment away from the handling area.

Flight Zone

An important concept of livestock handling is the animal's flight zone or personal space. When a person enters the flight zone, the animal moves away. Understanding of the flight zone can reduce stress and help prevent accidents. The size of the flight zone varies depending on how accustomed the cattle are to their current surroundings, people, etc.

The edge of the flight zone can be determined by slowly walking up to the animals. If the handler penetrates the flight zone too deeply, the animal will either bolt and run away or turn back and run past the person. The animal will most likely stop moving when the handler retreats from the flight zone. The best place for the person to work is on the edge of the flight zone. Cattle sometimes rear up and become agitated while waiting in a single file chute. A common cause of this problem is a person leaning over the chute.

Properly Designed Alleys and Chutes

Design, construction and maintenance of chutes or working alleys are especially important. A curved working system or a properly designed loading box with double alleys is more efficient. Livestock will often balk when they have to move from an outdoor pen into a building. To combat this problem, animals should be lined up in a single file chute/working alley outside. Again, solid sides are recommended on both the handling facilities and the crowding pen that leads to a squeeze chute or loading ramp.

Herd Instinct

Cattle are herd animals, and they are likely to become highly agitated and stressed when they are separated from their herd mates. Many serious cattle-handling accidents have been caused by isolated, frantic cattle. If an isolated animal becomes agitated, other animals should be put in with it as cattle are motivated to maintain visual contact with each other. A gentle calf will keep an excited calf calm. Allow livestock to follow the leader and do

not rush them. If animals bunch up, handlers should concentrate on moving the leaders instead of pushing a group of animals from the rear. Proper handling management will reduce stress related to shipping fever and carcass damage resulting from bruising.

Providing environmental protection and adequate water is not just an issue of animal well-being, it is vital for optimizing cattle performance. Environmental protection should include excellent pen maintenance for confined cattle. Mud is a big profit robber in confined cattle, as mud increases maintenance requirements and decreases feed efficiency. Mud also causes considerable loss of hide value and increases the cost of processing at the packing plant. Providing environmental protection, mud control and an adequate supply of fresh, clean water are important parts of quality cattle management.

It is not desirable to work cows and pre-weaned calves through the working facility at the same time. Young calves may get trampled by the cows resulting in calf injury. Therefore, in order to prevent injury to pre-weaned calves, it is important to sort and process cows and calves separately.

Cattle Handling Guidelines

1. Using their natural flight zone, cattle can be moved quietly. To move forward, move toward their rear past their point of balance (shoulder). To stop or back up cattle in the chute or alley, move forward past their point of balance.
2. Handling facilities should ideally have curved chutes and round crowding pens.
3. Use two or more sorting pens in front of the squeeze chute.
4. Never fill a crowding pen more than three-quarters full; cattle need room to turn around.
5. Do not use the crowding pen as a staying area.

6. Cattle should move easily up the chute. If not, hanging chains, shadows, backstops, noises, dogs or people could be preventing movement.
7. Cover the sides of the squeeze chute, especially the back three-quarters, to reduce balking as they enter the chute.
8. Minimize your use of cattle prods (electric and others that bruise). Instead, wave sticks with plastic streamers or paddles on the end.
9. Reducing stress on the animal will reduce animal injuries and sickness, employee injury and increase overall efficiency.

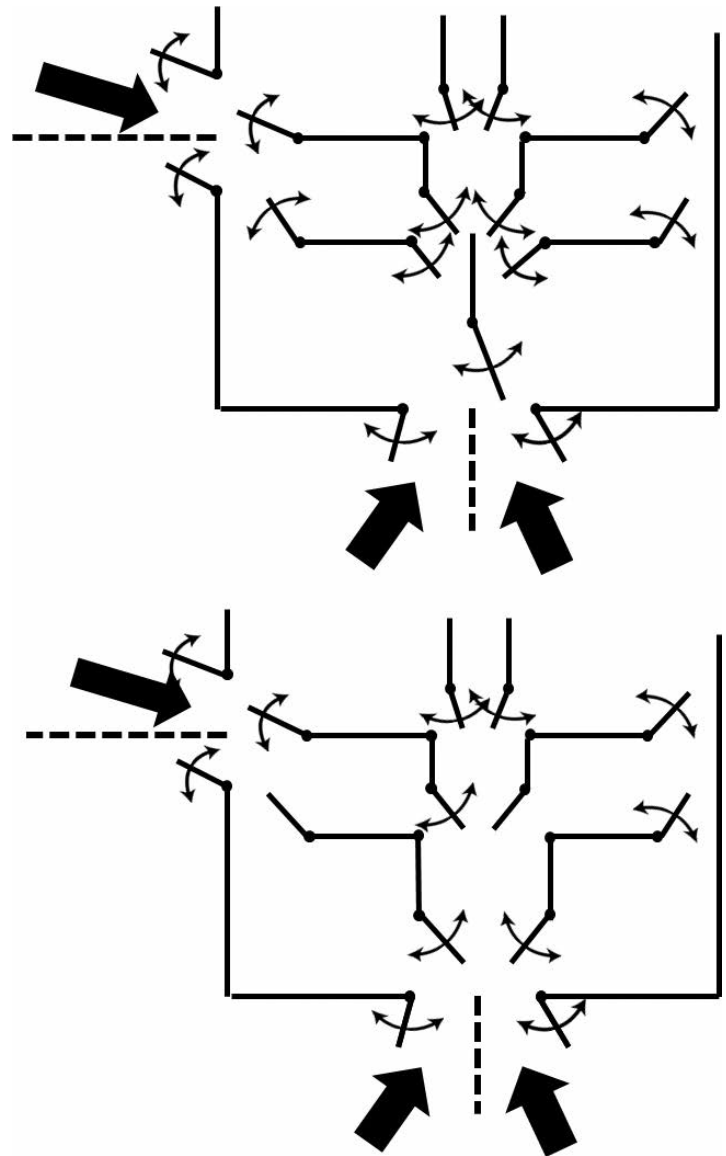
Site Selection

The first consideration when building cattle working facilities is location. Facilities should be easily reached by trucks and trailers under various conditions and be near the cattle for easy movement into the facilities. In addition, some operations, due to their physical layout, may be better off with more than one set of working facilities on the farm.

For convenience, working facilities should be placed along a central fence line, in an area where several fence lines and pastures converge or in an area where the cattle can easily be assembled. Fence lines serve as a way to funnel cattle into the working facilities as shown in Figure 1. Fence lines next to the working facilities should be built stronger than normal fence lines to withstand the additional strain of funneling cattle into the pens.

It generally isn't wise to build working facilities in the middle of a pasture. When this is done, the cattle cannot be easily driven into the pens. They must be lured into the pens and trapped. A final point to consider in selecting a site for working facilities is drainage. The site should be well drained so that pens and chutes do not get extremely muddy causing cattle to balk or bog down. On some sites it may be best to haul in gravel or other fill materials to raise the level of the site or fill in low areas for better drainage.

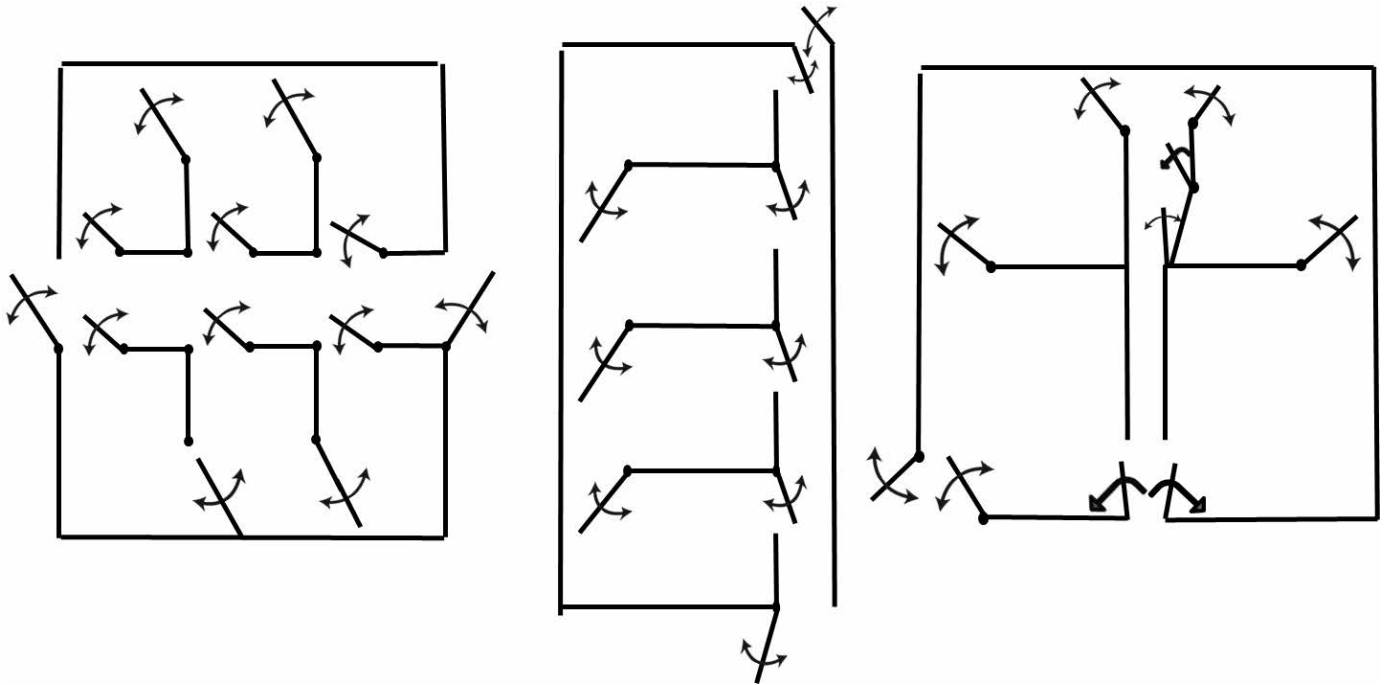
FIGURE 1. Use major fence lines to funnel cattle into pens.



Pens

Pens must serve several purposes to create a good set of working facilities. Pens should be able to hold the cattle being worked. They should also be used for sorting cattle into groups, and they should serve as holding pens, hospital pens and quarantine pens for newly arrived cattle. Several pens should be built into the working facilities instead of one large pen for the whole herd. Several layouts are shown in Figure 2. All of the layouts are set up so that cattle can be sorted and held in groups.

FIGURE 2. Arrange pens and gates for easy cattle movement and sorting.



In addition, pens should be arranged so that cattle can be easily worked in any order desired. Pen layout should allow for future additions. Pens are often added to accommodate an increase in herd size or a change in cattle management. Plans for pens should be checked to find one suitable for the cattle operation and the site location.

Most of the major problems seen with working facilities are pens that are too large, a lack of enough holding pens, gates that do not work properly or gates that swing in the wrong direction.

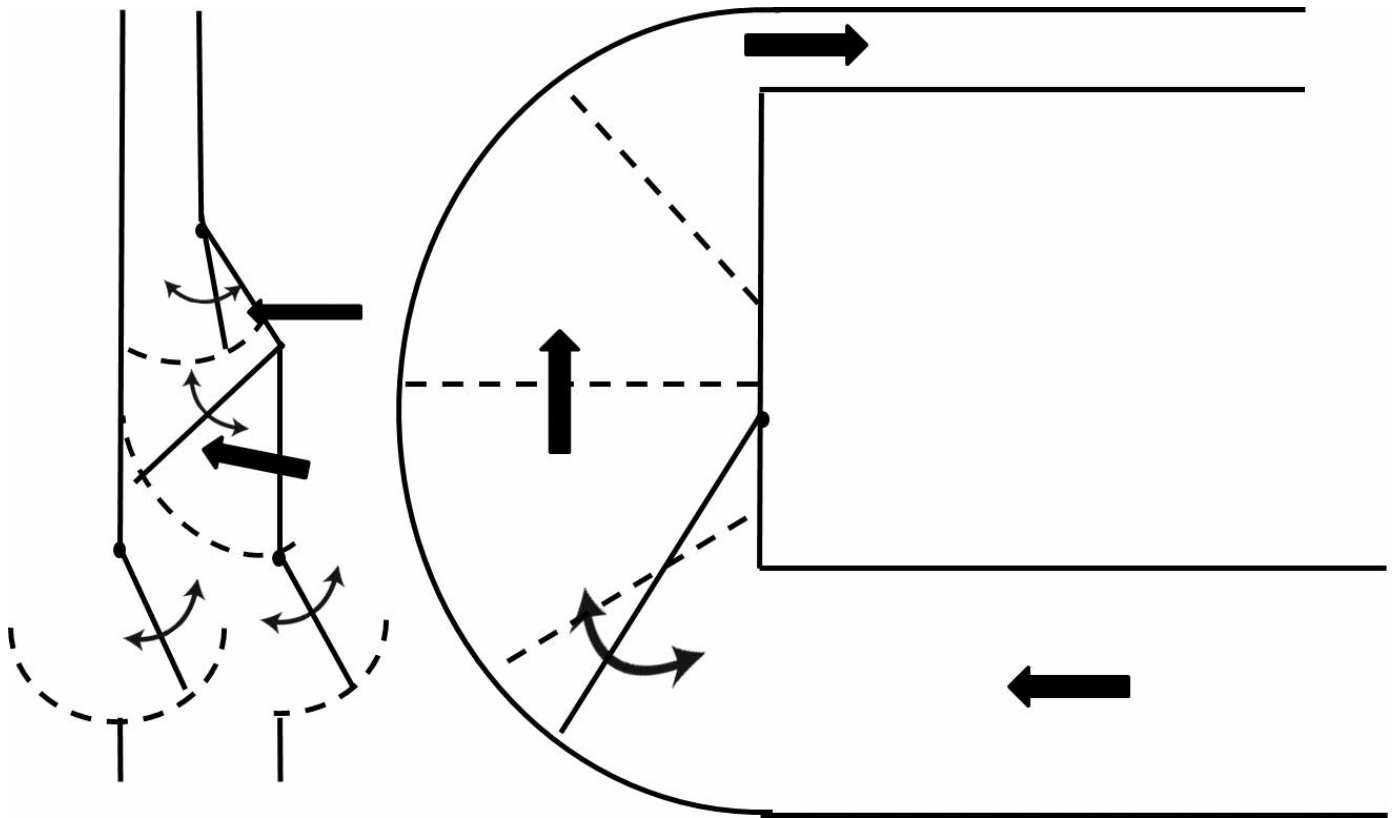
Crowding Pen

The major use of the crowding pen is to funnel cattle into the working chute. The crowding pen must be designed so that cattle can be easily moved into it from the holding pens and then easily moved into the working chute. The heart of the crowding pen is a swinging gate that is used to reduce the size of the crowding pen and to push cattle into the working chute.

The swing gate can be designed to latch at various positions as it closes. An automatic or self-locking latch on the swing gate can speed up movement of cattle through the crowding pen. The swing gate should be solid planked, close planked or covered with plywood to prevent cattle from seeing people or other animals and balking.

Crowding pens can either be straight sided or circular (solid sweep or tub). Examples of some crowding pens and swing gates are shown in Figure 3. The current trend in working facilities is toward circular crowding pens and curved alleys leading to the squeeze chutes. This trend takes advantage of the tendency for cattle to circle when penned in a small area. Another trend in crowding pens is the use of solid walls or close placement of planks up to 4½ to 5 feet high. This prevents cattle from seeing out of the pen and reduces balking in the crowding pen.

FIGURE 3. Crowding pens should move cattle easily into the working chute.



Bud Box

A Bud Box is a facility design that allows the handler to be positioned correctly to facilitate cattle flow out of the box into either the crowd alley leading to a chute or to a trailer load out. Always keep in mind that the box is a flow-through part of the facility. Cattle should never be staged in the box waiting to be sent into the crowd alley or to a trailer. Bring them in and let them flow back out immediately.

Dimensions are important to the successful use of a box but not as critical as handler position in relation to the stock leaving the box. Without proper position and attention to detail, a box will only confuse the stock and frustrate the handler.

The box should be large enough to accommodate a volume of cattle to fill the crowd alley or fill

a trailer compartment. A crowd alley to a squeeze chute should hold a minimum of 4 cows and might need to hold 20 head depending on the speed of processing. Crowd alleys on cow-calf operations will typically hold 5 to 6 cows. Facilities working calves or yearlings routinely need crowd alleys for 12 to 20 head of cattle.

Remember, the crowd alley will normally not be empty when additional cattle are brought through the box. To maintain flow, it will be necessary to add additional cattle while one or two stand in the crowd alley awaiting processing. Consequently, the length of the crowd alley is important. Ideally the crowd alley would be long enough to hold an adequate number of cattle for processing while more cattle are brought through the box – without disrupting flow. A short crowd alley may result in frequent interruptions of cattle flow and processing.

For some reason the industry has migrated toward the crowd alley starting to curve at the entrance from the tub or box. The exit from a tub or a box and entrance into the crowd alley should be straight for at least two mature cow body lengths. This allows flow to become established without the appearance of entering a dead end crowd alley. Keep it straight for at least 12 feet and then start a curve if warranted (ex., space is limited). Otherwise a long straight crowd alley works very well for processing cattle.

Most cow-calf operations will need a box that is at least 12 feet wide and 20 feet deep. It can be 14 feet wide and should be if the handler will be on horseback. Depending on the size of the cattle being worked, it could be 16 feet wide if the handler in the box will always be on horseback. Both the 14- and 16-foot widths are too wide for comfortably working most stock on foot.

A box can certainly be wider than an alley leading up to it. In fact, going from a 10- or 12-foot alleyway into a 14-foot-wide box will normally allow the cattle entering the box to do so faster, setting up the transition even better. Do not let the width of an alley dictate the width of the box.

The length/depth needed is determined by the size of the group handled. Again, group size is dictated by the capacity of the crowd alley or trailer compartment being loaded. The box needs to be deep enough to allow the cattle to flow to the back of the box, let the handler close the gate and get in position before the cattle transition out of the back of the box. Just like a tub system, never overfill the box. Success depends on the flow into, transition and flow out of the box.

For most crowd alleys a 20- to 24-foot box is adequate depth. Any deeper may force the handler working in the box to move too deep in the box to initiate flow. As the handler returns to the correct position, their movement with the cattle will

stop flow and turn the cattle back. Going with movement slows it or stops it. Neither response is desirable in getting cattle to flow out of the box.

Other aspects of a box design that are critical to success relate to whether or not the sides are enclosed. It is absolutely essential to have the end of the box open sided so cattle are going to light and will build speed as they enter the box. Entry speed facilitates the transition and correct flow out of the box. Solid (opaque) panels should be limited to the box's entry gate and the sides of the box closest to the crowd alley and load out exits. Note: Solid sides in these areas are not required but may minimize distractions. Load out and crowd alley exit gates must open back flat against the sides of the box.

A box used in loading semi-trailers may require additional depth (30 feet maximum) to facilitate filling compartments quickly. If using this same large box for a crowd alley, the addition of a block gate in the box to shorten it might be a good solution.

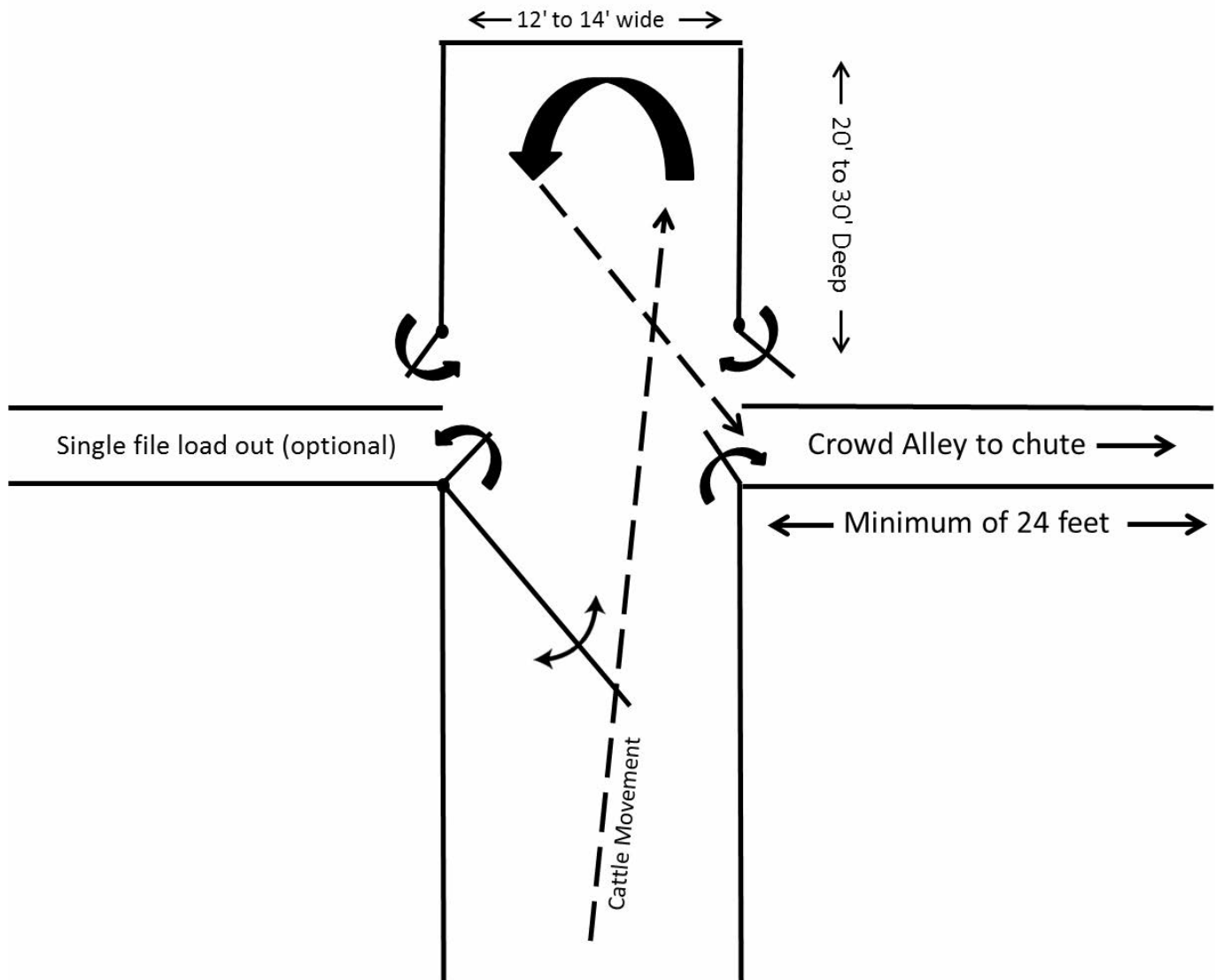
In summary, a box needs to be 12 to 14 feet wide for most operations and 20 to 30 feet deep depending on the number of cattle needed to flow through the system at any given time. See Table 1 and Figure 4. Leave the back open (translucent); cover the sides and entrance gate if necessary.

TABLE 1. Bud Box Dimensions.

Handler	Width	Depth*
Always on foot	12 feet	Minimum 20 feet
Afoot and horseback	14 feet	20 to 30 feet
Always horseback	16 feet	Maximum 30 feet

*Dictated by size of groups handled

FIGURE 4. Bud box showing movement of cattle to a crowding alley.
Adapted from R. Gill and R. Machen, Designing a Bud Box, AgriLife Extension, Texas A&M University.



Working Alley

The working alley is used to move cattle to the squeeze chute, scales, tilt table or loading chute. The working alley must be designed to move cattle in an orderly fashion and in single file.

The working alley can be either straight or curved. The current trend is toward curved working alleys for the same reasons as circular crowding pens. Also, curved working alleys work well because cattle cannot see what is directly ahead of them and therefore move through the chute easier. As with crowding pens, the use of solid walls or close

placement of planks up to 4½ to 5 feet high may be used to prevent cattle from looking out and balking at what they see.

A major hindrance to the efficiency of working cattle is working alleys not being designed at the appropriate width for the cattle being worked. Too often, progress is slowed and calf injury occurs when calves can turn around in alleys because the width is set for mature cattle.

Working alleys can have sloped sides; that is, building the alley wider at the top than at the bottom. Sloped sides in the working alley enable

the alley to handle cattle of extreme size differences without cattle turning around in the alley. Manufactured working alleys also offer adjustable alleys so the width of the alley can be adjusted for different sizes of cattle (mature cows, calves, bulls, etc.). Oftentimes the width of the working alley can adjust from 18 to 30 inches. Many working alleys are 20 feet long, but the length of the working alley is a personal preference.

Another option is a catwalk or an elevated walkway alongside the working alley. With a catwalk, cattle can be more easily reached and moved through the working alley. Cutting gates and blocking gates can be built into the working alley to improve working facility efficiency. A cutting gate can be built into the working alley and is used to sort cattle out of the working alley. A cutting gate can also be used as an emergency entrance into the chute to get to downed animals.

Blocking gates can be added to the working alley either as a slide-in or drop-down gate. The main purpose of the blocking gate is to regulate the flow of cattle through the working alley. Blocking gates will provide a more orderly flow of cattle through the alley. Blocking gates will also prevent animals from backing up in the working alley.

Another item seen in working chutes as an option to blocking gates is a backup stop – usually a spring-loaded section of pipe that moves forward with the cattle and springs back behind the animal to block the alley as the animal passes. The backup stop will prevent animals from backing out of the alley.

Two other features for working alleys are overhead restrainers and emergency release panels. An overhead restrainer is placed over the top of the working alley to keep animals from rearing up and falling down or from riding the next animal in line. The overhead restrainer should be wide enough to prevent cattle from raising their heads above the restrainer and should be set to keep the animal's head near shoulder height. The restrainer should be adjustable for the height of cattle in the alley.

Emergency release panels are sections of the working alley that can be removed or opened to let

animals out that have fallen down and become stuck in the chute. Several well-placed cutting gates in the working chute will serve the same function as emergency release panels in getting to downed animals.

Squeeze Chute and Headgate

The squeeze chute and headgate are vital to the working facilities because essentially all work done on cattle is done in the squeeze chute and headgate. The sole purpose of the squeeze chute and headgate is to restrain the animal so that any desired management practice can be safely conducted on the animal. Safety is essential for both cattle and operator.

In designing working facilities, the squeeze chute and headgate should not open into a pasture. The squeeze chute and headgate should be enclosed in a pen. With this setup, a group of worked cattle can be turned out together or they can be moved back to a holding pen. More importantly, with an enclosed working area, an animal that gets out of the squeeze chute without being worked is not loose in the pasture and can easily be maneuvered back to the chute.

There are a number of manufactures that build outstanding squeeze chutes (Power River, Pearson Livestock Equipment, Priefert Manufacturing, W-W Livestock Systems, etc.). Squeeze chutes (headgate) come with many options and features (manual, hydraulic, sizes, portable vs. stationary, etc.), and the best one depends upon personal preference. Money spent on a good squeeze chute and headgate is often one of the best investments made in the cattle operation.

Before purchasing a squeeze chute and headgate, check with different manufacturers to determine design features, construction and any special features. In addition to checking with manufacturers, check with people in the area that have commercial equipment. Find out what they like and dislike about their equipment. Major design features to consider when purchasing a squeeze chute and headgate are the latching system, protruding handles and levers, squeeze system, side exit, general or overall construction, options and headgate style.

Many of today's squeeze chutes have convenient doors and latches to administer animal health products according to Beef Quality Assurance Guidelines.

When looking at a squeeze chute, check for protruding handles and levers. All squeeze chutes and headgates have one or more handles or levers that are needed to operate the equipment. Handles and levers should be placed and operated in a manner that will not hit and possibly injure the operator or bystanders. Handles and levers that are most likely to cause problems are those that are located at head and shoulder height and those subject to sudden movement. As with all equipment, learn how to properly operate the squeeze chute and headgate. Some chutes place the headgate controls on the front for a one-man operation (Figure 5).

Side exits are available on many squeeze chute models and can be quite useful. With proper arrangement of fences and pens, a side exit can be



FIGURE 5. All controls are on the front of the chute for one-man operation.

used to sort or cut out cattle when they reach the squeeze chute. In addition, the side exit can be used as an emergency exit or release on downed cattle in the squeeze chute.

There are options available with squeeze chutes. One option is a brisket bar that keeps cows from kneeling and keeps cows standing (Figure 6). Almost all chutes have side panels that drop down (Figure 7) so feet and legs can be examined or bulls can be BSE tested. Some chutes even have blinders to prevent visual distraction allowing cattle to enter the chute without baulking (Figure 8).

Oftentimes a palpation cage can be purchased with the squeeze chute. The palpation cage allows someone to step in behind the animal in the squeeze chute. The palpation cage is basically designed for pregnancy testing and artificial insemination work, but will serve well any time access to the rear end of the animal is needed.



FIGURE 6. Brisket bar keeps cows from kneeling and keeps cows standing.



FIGURE 7. Lower panels can be removed to access the cattle's feet and legs.



FIGURE 8. Flexible poly blinders to help funnel cattle into the headgate by reducing visual distractions from outside the chute.

Loading Ramps

A loading ramp is used to load and unload cattle into the working facilities from a trailer. With the widespread use of gooseneck trailers and bumper-pull stock trailers, many cattle operations can load out through their working alley. With these operations, a loading ramp is not needed. Other operations that load out into large trucks and tractor-trailers will need a loading ramp. The loading ramp can be built in and have its own connecting chute, or a portable loading ramp can be used in line with the squeeze chute. If a variety of trucks and trailers are used to transport cattle, an adjustable-height loading ramp should be used.

Optional Equipment

Two pieces of equipment – scales and calf tilt table – are optional items that can be built into the facilities or added at a later time.

Scales are perhaps one item that should be on the necessary list of equipment. However, scales are usually left out of the facilities and added later as the cattle management program develops. Scales are useful to the purebred and commercial breeder for

performance testing. Scales are also useful to the backgrounder to monitor calf in-weight, out-weight and total calf weight gain.

Scales can be placed in the working facilities in four ways. The easiest way is to set portable encaged scales in front of the squeeze chute to weigh cattle. The second way is to purchase a combination squeeze chute and scales. The third option is to build a permanent set of scales into the working chute between the working alley and squeeze chute. The scales can also be located in a separate chute to be used strictly for weighing. This is common for group weights, and sometimes these scales are certifiable. The fourth

option is to incorporate a portable platform scale in the working alley before the cattle reach the squeeze chute.

The last piece of optional equipment is a calf tilt table. The tilt table is used to immobilize calves on their side for castration, dehorning and other work. Tilt tables are best suited for larger cow-calf operations and backgrounding operations where a large numbers of calves need to be processed. Tilt tables work best on calves less than 550 pounds.

Size and Space Requirements

Size and space requirements for the working facilities are listed in Table 2 and are organized according to animal size. It is recommended that cow-calf operations use the size requirements for cattle over 1,200 pounds. The main use of this table is to size chutes and pens to the type of cattle being worked and the size of the cattle operation. Width requirements on chutes should be followed closely since one of the major problems is chutes that are too wide. There is information on height of fences and chute walls and the type of cattle worked. Fence height is important in helping keep some hard-to-work cattle in the pens and chutes.

TABLE 2. Size and Space Requirements for Cattle Working Facilities.

	Calves to 600 lbs	Calves 600 to 1,200 lbs	Cow-calf and cattle over 1,200 lbs¹
Holding area , square ft/head	14	18	20
Crowding pen , square ft/head	6	10	12
Working chute, straight sides			
width	18"	22"	26"
length (minimum)	20'	20'	20'
Working chute, straight sides			
width, inside bottom	15"	15"	16"
width, inside at 4' height	20"	24"	28"
length (minimum)	20'	20'	20'
Working chute fence			
Posts			
depth in ground ²	36 to 48"	36 to 48"	36 to 48"
clearance above ground for crossbeams	7'	7'	7'
Fence			
height, solid wall	54 to 60"	54 to 60"	60"
top rail, gentle cattle	54 to 60"	54 to 60"	60"
top rail, hard-to-work and wild cattle	60 to 72"	60 to 72"	72"
Corral fence			
Posts			
depth in ground ²	36 to 48"	36 to 48"	36 to 48"
height above ground			
– gentle cattle	60"	60"	60"
– large cattle, wild cattle	60 to 72"	60 to 72"	72"
Loading chute			
width	26"	26"	26 to 30"
length	12'	12'	12'
rise in/ft (maximum)	3½"	3½"	3½"
ramp height			
trailer	15"		
pickup	28"		
large truck	40"		
tractor-trailer	48"		

¹ For herds with large, thickly made cattle, bulls over 2,000 to 2,200 lbs and cows over 1,300 to 1,400 lbs, you may want to add 4 inches to chute widths.

² Chute and corral post depth will depend on the soil's ability to hold posts. Posts need to hold tight under heavy use.

Other Construction Features

Some additional features can improve the ease of use, comfort and versatility of working facilities. A shed built over the squeeze chute and extending back over the working alley and well out in front of the headgate can make working cattle easier in wet and/or cold weather. The shed can also provide welcome shade on a summer day. The shed should be high enough so that there will be plenty of head room for a person on a catwalk or a person climbing over the working chute.

Covered working facilities are often accommodated with concrete floors. Concrete floors can help keep facilities washed and clean; however, smooth finishes should be avoided to prevent cattle from slipping and injuring themselves. Rubber mats, such as woven recycled tire treads, are often placed at chute exits to prevent cattle from slipping and falling when exiting the chute.

Lights in the working area can be quite useful if cattle need to be treated or worked late in the day or at night. Outlets will enable the use of electrical equipment in the squeeze chute-headgate and working chute areas.

Man passes or safety passes are narrow (12"-14") openings placed in strategic locations in some working facilities. They can serve as exits from the facilities, from pens or alleys, from the crowding pen and at places where catwalks meet fences. Passes can be a convenience feature making access in and out of the area easier for equipment and men. More importantly, these passes can serve as escape routes if hard-to-work or wild cattle are being worked in the facilities. In addition, small man gates (2'-4' wide) can be placed at various locations for convenience of moving in and out of the cattle facilities.

Gate construction and hanging should receive careful consideration. Gates should be built and braced well enough to withstand considerable use and some abuse without warping, twisting or

sagging. When hanging gates, carefully check the facility plans to see how gates are supposed to swing and how far they are supposed to swing. Many gates need to swing a full 180 degrees, and a few may have to swing nearly 360 degrees. A 16-inch clearance at the bottom of gates can provide room for a man to roll under in an emergency.

A water line to the working area should be considered. Water in the working area can be used for cleaning equipment, and a pen or two with water can serve as holding or sick pens. Water tanks should be placed to avoid disrupting cattle flow and avoid cattle injury when moving cattle into or out of pens.

Summary

Cattle working facilities are a vital part of the total cattle operation. The facilities should provide a fast and efficient way to work cattle. The facilities will provide a safe working area for both people and cattle. And, with good working facilities, the operator will be able to carry out many management practices on the herd that will help ensure that the cattle operation will be successful.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE CATTLE WORKING FACILITIES, YOU DON'T NEED CATTLE.

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