



# Chute First, Ask Questions Later

## Tips for Successful, Low Stress Fall Processing

"When I hear someone talk about a horse or cow being stupid, I figure it's a sure sign the animal has outfoxed them."  
- Tom Dorrance

I have seen some wonderful beef operations with excellent handling facilities and great stockwomen and men, but I have also seen a few poor facilities. These always seem to be the ones with the complaints about 'stupid' cattle. While there are some individual and breed differences in "handle-ability", much is a result of the quality of the facility and the handling practices. Sometimes, it is simply a result of 'bad becoming normal'. This could be a slow deterioration of the facility, causing cattle to balk more in the chute, increasing handler frustration and rough handling, which then slowly becomes the norm. However, taking an objective look at your facilities and handling methods can identify areas where improvements (if needed) can be made.

### Why is Lower Stress Handling Important?

Keeping animal's stress level low during handling can save time, money, and keeps your cattle as productive as possible. Stressed livestock have a greater likelihood of injuring the handlers, themselves, or other animals. Their physiologic response to stress can decrease their immune response (which is important for vaccinations to work properly) as well as a possible increase in the risk of pregnancy loss. Low stress handling goes faster, and will save you money if you are paying employees or a veterinarian for their time.

### Planning Ahead

Determine what tasks you want to get done. Do you need to vaccinate? Ear tag? De-worm? Preg check? Note where on the animal (neck, head, back, rear) you need access too. Does your chute make it easy and safe to do this? Think back on last fall and identify any problems you had, and where they occurred. Was there a spot the cattle didn't seem to want to go past? Was it hard for them to hit the head gate correctly? Write down anything you need to address. As well, keep track of things that are easy to quantify. How many animals vocalized while moving through the crowd pen and chute? Did any animals fall down? Did you use an electric prod, and if so, on how many animals? How fast did cattle leave the chute? To measure this, you can the record gait as they leave the chute (walk, trot, run or jump).

Temple Grandin (Colorado State University) has done audits on feedlots and found that it is very possible to keep vocalizations in the chute at less than 3%. Electric prod use should be at less than 1%. If you think your numbers are higher, try and determine where you can improve your system so that your processing can go smoother this year.

It is not necessarily the case that a lot of money needs to be spent to have a functional system. I have seen some excellent, low cost facilities that work well when coupled with good stockpeople. I have also seen some expensive, well designed systems fail because of poor handling. Remember both the facility and the handling need to be addressed in order to have success.

### The Chute

The best system is one where cattle are moved back to or nearby the area they started from. The single file chute should have solid sides to prevent cattle from seeing handlers in their flight zone. The inside should be clean

with no objects sticking out, and any corners should be gradual. A well lit area is important, but if indoors make sure the lights do not shine directly at the cattle. Making the head-gate the best lit area will encourage animals to move forward. Check for reflective surfaces such as shiny metal or puddles which cattle may balk at. Ensure the area is free of strong drafts and noises are kept to a minimum. Backstops should be in place and should be

safe and secure. Flooring should be non-slip. Check the head-gate is well oiled and set at an appropriate width.

Take the time to walk through your chute as the cattle would, at the same time of day you plan to process the animals, and observe everything the cattle would see. Get someone who isn't familiar with your system to do the same and see if they observe things you may miss.

### The Handling

Cattle will remember traumatic experiences, and will be more stressed the next time they are handled. New situations are also stressful. If they are not used to it, let the cattle hang out in the crowd pen for a bit before moving them into the chute. Always try to move animals in groups or pairs. A lone animal is very dangerous and may charge you to get back to the herd.

Move cattle by utilizing their flight zone. The point of balance is at the shoulder. As you move ahead of or behind the shoulder, the animal will move in the opposite direction. Remember that cattle are always reacting to your movements and reading what your intentions are.

How fast should you push them? A comfortable walking speed for a cow is 2-3 km/hr, whereas humans usually walk at 5-7 km/hr. Move cattle slowly and calmly. If animals are beginning to run or stopping and trying to turn around, this indicates their stress level is too high. The handler should back off and let them calm down.

Cattle have trouble with depth perception at ground level when they are walking with their heads up. If there are distractions on the ground, they may lower their heads and appear to balk. Choice can also play a role. A novel object may be investigated curiously by animals in a pen, but the same object can cause cattle to balk when they have to move past it in the chute.

Tools such as prods and canes should be used judiciously. There is a difference between a stubborn animal that can see the way forward, and a panicking animal who doesn't know where to go. Very nervous cattle should be given time to move forward. By designing your system well, you should have very few animals that refuse to move.

To avoid excessive prod use, keep it nearby but do not carry it. Primarily use other equipment such as a flag on a paddle stick to move animals forward. Remember that prods should NEVER be used on sensitive areas such as the rectum or vulva.

By taking some time to assess your handling facilities and practices before fall processing this year, you may be able to find areas where some simple improvements can yield a much more pleasant processing experience for both the animals and the handlers. **OB**

