Facility Design and Low Stress Cattle Handling

By Jesse Fulton, Associate Director – Producer Education

At one point or another in an animal’s lifetime, they will be handled by a producer, and generally this happens multiple times throughout the life cycle. Handling can be stressful to cattle, but by using best management practices this stress can be reduced. Proper cattle handling practices are not only important to reduce stress on the animals, but they are also important for animal and human safety.

Stress in cattle can cause a reduction in growth and performance that in turn decreases profit to your operation. Good stockmanship should be practiced on every cattle operation to decrease any unnecessary stress the animals may feel. The checkoff-funded Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program advocates that all cattle producers practice good stockmanship when handling cattle to reduce this unnecessary stress. Checkoff-funded Stockmanship & Stewardship programs have been hosted across the country in order to help educate producers on best handling practices in order to reduce stress imposed on cattle when handling.

Two important basics to understand when handling cattle are flight zones and point of balance. The flight zone of an animal is the distance between the handler and the animal before the animal begins to move away. Understanding the flight zone can reduce stress and help prevent accidents. The flight zone varies depending on how accustomed the cattle are to their current surroundings and people. When the handler enters the flight zone the animal will begin to move away, and when the handler is no longer in the flight zone, the animal will stop.

The second basic is understanding the animal’s point of balance. The point of balance of an animal is the point on the animal where we can position ourselves to move the animal forward, backward, left and right. Cattle producers who have not had the opportunity to attend any cattle stockmanship demonstrations can still learn more on best management practices to cattle handling by accessing the National BQA channel located on YouTube. By searching the keyword “handling” several informative videos narrated by industry leading stockmen can be found covering cattle handling. These videos show examples of the correct practices producers should follow when handling cattle.

One important key to low stress handling is the design of the facilities in which the cattle will be handled. The first step to being successful when handling your cattle is good facility design. The design of your facilities can either improve or decrease your success when handling your cattle. Cattle facilities do not need to be the latest and greatest thing on the market. However, they should be well thought out and functional facilities that allow multiple “escape” options in the event a problem arises and handlers need to release cattle from the handling facilities, preventing harm to the animal or personnel.

Cattle facilities where the alley leading to the chute is curved tend to work the best for cattle flow. Curved alleys utilize cattle’s natural behavior of wanting to return from where they started. Although curved alleys in a cattle facility improve cattle flow, too sharp of turns can cause cattle to bark and reduce cattle flow.

To find more examples and tips on cattle handling facilities producers can access the National BQA channel located on YouTube. By searching the keyword “facilities” several informative videos covering cattle facility tips can be found. These videos show examples of correct facility design.

With proper facility design and utilizing best management practices when working with cattle, producers can greatly reduce the stress handling may cause cattle. It is also important for the safety of the animals and personnel working with the animals.