



Grass-Fed Beef Initiative Extension Series

Fact Sheet 11 of 11

On-Farm Cattle Handling and Weighing Facilities

Handling and Weighing

Handling and weighing are management practices that should be routine in cattle production. Management practices, health treatments and traceability all require the ability to safely handle cattle without stress. Tracking the growth of cattle being finished on forage is critical to ensure success. If you cannot tell how your cattle are gaining and what they weigh, it will be very hard to ensure that they are finishing properly.

To work with cattle safely and successfully, you must understand how to handle them. Failing to understand your cattle and how they see you and respond to you will result in unnecessary stress for animals and humans alike. If cattle become excited it is advisable to let them calm down before trying to work them again, and it is not unusual for this to take 20 to 30 minutes. Take your time from the very beginning and don't rush things; working your cattle is a prime example of "the more you rush, the longer it's going to take."

We communicate with cattle through sight, sound and touch; they see you, hear you and feel your contact. Cattle are aware of your actions, and any contact, fast movements, or loud and unexpected noises will raise their level of anxiety. Take your time, be calm and quiet, and make sure that anyone working with you is comfortable with cattle and understands your expectations regarding handling the cattle.

Make yourself and those who work with you aware of the concept of cattle flight zones (the area around an animal where it begins to feel uncomfortable and perceives pressure) and cattle point of balance (usually at the animal's shoulder; it is determined by the animal's wide angle vision). If you understand these concepts it will be much easier to work cattle (e.g. to direct their movements) and anticipate how they will react to your efforts. See: "Stockmanship and Low Stress Handling, Understanding Cattle Behaviour" by Dr. R. Gill, available on the Perennia website.



Basic handling system with old scale mounded under chute with head gate

Proper handling and weighing system design (even a simple system) will save time, reduce stress, increase production, and improve meat quality. There are many variations for handling systems available, from basic homemade systems, to commercial portable systems.

Regardless of the system that you choose, it should have several elements: 1) a gathering area or pen that is strong enough to contain the cattle; 2) a crowding area or funnel that directs the cattle into the lead-in or crowding alley; and 3) a squeeze or chute with a head gate where the cattle can be restrained. This can be as simple as a crowding alley along a barn wall with a pen at one end and the working chute and head gate at the other.

For small herds, the lead-in or crowding alley might only be long enough to hold one or two cattle. The important thing is that this alley should be narrow enough to ensure that the cattle will remain in single file. To ensure this, it is useful if you can vary the width of the alley. Some commercial systems have adjustable sides to allow this. You can also make false sides from three-quarter inch plywood and spacers that are placed on the insides of the alley when small cattle are being handled.

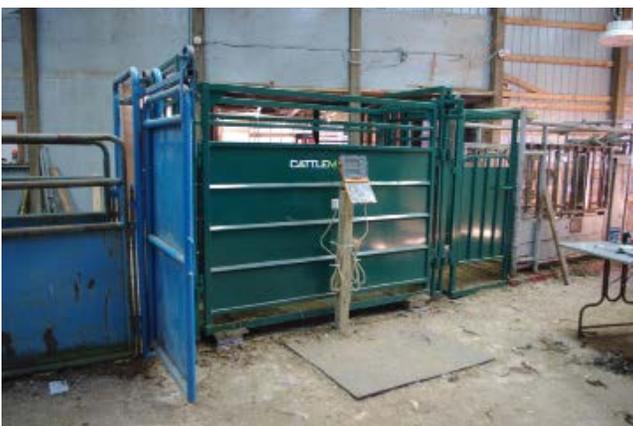


Squeeze with weigh scale

Alternatively, if you slope the sides of your alley (narrow at the bottom and wider at the top), you will achieve the same goal.

Knowing cattle weights is a basic management tool

There are a number of options for weighing systems. Some older mechanical scales are still serviceable, and most of these are incorporated into a chute or weighing box. The majority of new scales available are electronic or digital. There are two main configurations and they depend on where the load cells or weight bars are placed. The first placement option is under the squeeze or chute and the second is in the crowd alley. Both are very functional and work well.



Scale and weigh box before the Squeeze

There are also many options for scale heads, from simple digital read-outs showing just the weight, to computerized scale heads that interface with tag readers and computers. As the technology gets more complex, the price increases. Make sure that you purchase something that you are comfortable with and which makes your life easier.

Once you have a system in place it is important to maintain it so that it remains safe for the cattle and for you. A well-planned and well-maintained system will be used more and provide years of value and management dividends.

For more information

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