

Cattle Business in Mississippi – March 2009 **“Stocker Cents” article**

Stocker Cattle Receiving Facilities

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Designing and maintaining effective facilities is the first step in planning a successful calf receiving program. Facilities should allow for a smooth, low-stress flow of cattle. Avoid square corners where cattle could crowd and injure one another. Curved lanes are more effective in moving cattle forward. When possible, include solid sides to alleys to minimize outside visual distractions to cattle. Design chutes to proper widths (28 to 30 inches), not too narrow and not so wide that it will allow cattle to turn around.

Stocker operations must have effective means to load and unload cattle from trucks and trailers. Loading and unloading ramp heights differ depending on the type of trailers used. Maintaining loading ramps of different heights or an adjustable height loading ramp can facilitate a variety of calf transportation options. If tractor trailers are to be unloaded, these ramps should be single file (30 inches for mature cattle) to accommodate the 30-inch wide rear doors standards on most U.S. tractor-trailers. Ramps can be narrowed to less than 30 inches when only calves will be handled. To avoid cattle striking the sides of the trailer during loading, ramps should not be wider than the trailer opening. Self-aligning dock bumpers and telescoping ramp panels are useful for blocking gaps from misaligned trucks.

Cattle injuries can occur if unloading ramps are too steep. Target a loading ramp height of 20 degrees for a permanent ramp and 25 degrees for an adjustable ramp. Grooved stair steps are recommended for concrete ramps. Plan steps to be 4 inches high and 12 inches deep.

Make sure to provide cattle with adequate footing in loading areas, particularly on loading ramps. Smooth concrete will allow cattle to slip. Concrete flooring should be grooved or texturized to provide acceptable traction. When portable or adjustable ramps are used, make sure that they are firmly secured. Movement or wobbling of the ramp can cause cattle to balk when they walk on it. Remove any sharp, protruding, or distracting objects from the loading alleys that might injure cattle or cause them to balk during handling. Good drainage is also important as it minimizes puddles and mud in receiving areas.

From the unloading ramp, the cattle will likely go directly to sorting pens for processing (unless they have traveled a long distance). More than one pen will allow sorting into groups based on treatment needs, size, type and any other classification that might be needed. Each pen should be large enough to handle the expected number of cattle. However, if a pen is too large, cattle will be able to get by the handler while they are sorting. Another point to consider in sorting pens is having enough gates and that they are properly placed relative to the allies and other pens.

After sorting, the cattle should be moved to the working area through an alley that is approximately 10 to 12 feet wide. Similar to large pens, an alley that is too wide will give the cattle room to go around the handler. Alternatively, if the alley is too narrow, it could force temperamental cattle to go over the handler. This alley should end into a crowding pen or crowding tub that funnels cattle into the working alley. A common alley is often used to move cattle to and from the working area but a second alley might be useful when processing large numbers of cattle in a relatively short period of time.

The working alley, that leads to the squeeze chute or headgate, should be at least 20 feet long to avoid delays in efficiently moving cattle. The width of this alley will vary depending on the size of the cattle being processed. It should be wide enough for cattle to move forward without much resistance but not wide enough for them to turn around. Eighteen inches is a good width for calves but will not accommodate larger cattle. Some commercially available working alleys are adjustable. However, it might be more cost effective to build a 22 to 26 inch wide working ally and hang spacers over the side when working smaller calves. As with the loading ramp, solid sides will keep cattle moving forward without balking at motion or noises outside the chute.

The least expensive way to create a working area is to securely attach a headgate to the end of the working ally. However, this will give little control over the calf as it is being processed. Commercial squeeze chutes effectively restrain cattle, improve processing efficiency and increase overall safety. One of the most important considerations in buying or building a working chute is the ability to give all injections in the neck. Make sure that this can be done quickly and, most importantly, in a way that does not put the handler's arm in danger of being injured.