

Take the Corral to the Pasture

Portable corral systems and proper handling techniques create options for cattlemen.

by **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

Applying low-stress cattle handling techniques and the use of portable corrals can make many management practices more feasible, especially when cattle are in large pastures far from the corrals at home. Nebraska veterinarian Tom Noffsinger says ranchers who use portable panels in conjunction with a basic “Bud Box” can make handling cattle very easy — whether sorting them, loading them into a truck or trailer, putting them through a chute for vaccinations or artificial insemination (AI), or any other task that requires being hands on.

The Bud Box is a simple facility design named after the late Bud Williams (one of the early mentors in low-stress cattle handling), who came up with the idea. For many years, he promoted the concept of using a box-shaped set of gates when loading beef cattle onto trucks or into a processing chute. The simple design of the Bud Box allows us to take advantage of many of the natural behavioral tendencies of cattle (see “Utilizing the Bud Box in a corral setup”).

The Bud Box is roughly 14 feet (ft.) wide and 20-30 ft. long. The gate is closed once the cattle are in the Bud Box, and the gate should latch near the exit lane. The width of the exit lane should be one animal wide, and this exit lane should be perpendicular to the “box” area. These dimensions are just guidelines, but should be similar regardless of the size of the cattle or the number of cattle that need to be worked through the Bud Box.

Noffsinger says that working cattle through the Bud Box is effective only if stockmen understand the techniques taught by Bud Williams for low-stress cattle handling, sorting or loading.

Lots of options

“A person can use this type of facility for loading pairs out in the pasture, or doing heat synchronization and AI, giving preweaning vaccinations, preg-checking cows, or other tasks,” he says. You can take the corral to the cattle rather than having to bring them home to the working facility.

“There are some very simple corral configurations, using straight portable panels. You can create a working system with a few 10-, 12- or 14-foot panels — whatever you have on hand. Some of the simplest facilities utilize two holding pens and a simple short Bud Box, and then a straight alley that goes back along one of the pens. That way you get dual use from that row of panels,” explains Noffsinger.



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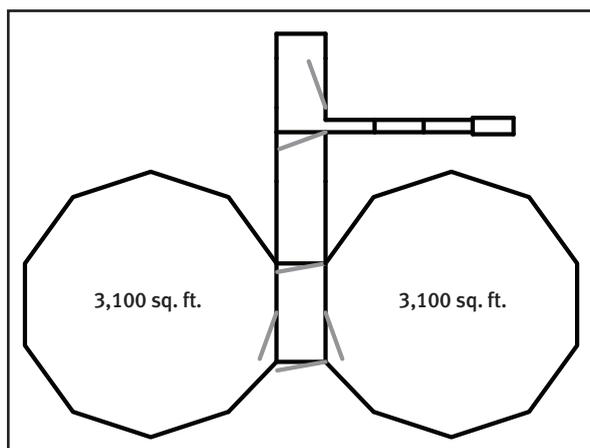
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“There is enough interest and awareness now regarding some of the things Bud Williams taught us that these corral set-ups are more understandable and very easy to use. We can use very simple, basic facilities to do a wide variety of things — to load cattle or to process them,” he says. For instance, the concept about proper timing of vaccinations is now a feasible goal, even if you can’t bring your cattle back to the home place that soon.

“We know that vaccines work really well if we can give them ahead of stress, exposure and transportation. We know this protocol helps cattle stay healthier. I spend most of my time in feedlots, and sometimes wonder why we even bother to vaccinate cattle upon arrival because it is not very effective at that point,” says Noffsinger.

Those young cattle have just come through a lot of stress — including transport — and have a compromised immune system that is unable to respond appropriately to the vaccination, he

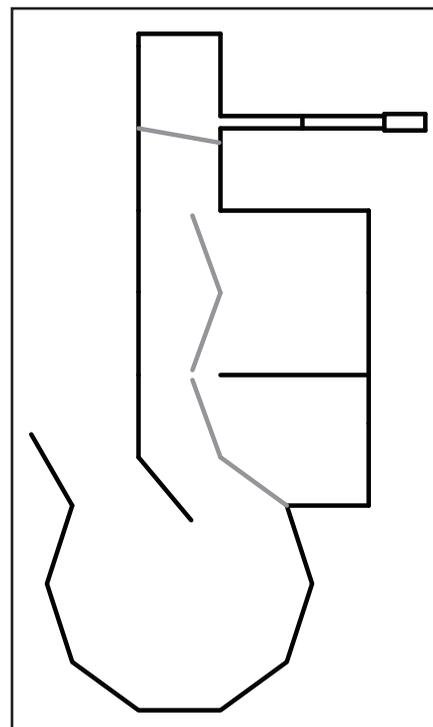
Below and left: Portable corral systems can be set up in a variety of ways to accommodate the work being done. The system should take advantage of normal cattle behavior.



explains. If the calves could be vaccinated a few weeks ahead of being shipped, this would make a big difference. Having the option of portable corrals could make this more feasible for many ranchers.

Use of portable corrals can open up a lot of possibilities that many ranchers might not have considered before. They might not think they could vaccinate calves ahead of weaning, because the cattle weren’t handy, and they didn’t want to bring them off pasture that soon. With portable corrals, they can take the facility to the cattle.

Similarly, some people think they could never utilize AI because the cows are in big range pastures that time of year. Portable corrals make many things possible, including AI for the cows and low-stress weaning of calves.



With a way to get hands on the cattle, we can utilize things like two-phase weaning that consists simply of asking calves to remain apart from their mothers overnight following sorting and vaccination, or utilize the most stress-free method with nose flaps. With portable corrals, calves can be worked through a chute to install the flaps and then turned back out with their mothers. Then five to seven days later they can be gathered again, the nose flaps removed and the calves hauled to their new location — completely weaned with little to no stress.

“The success of these little portable facilities is a culmination of proper cattle handling — how the cattle are gathered and how people influence the cattle to volunteer to move whichever direction we intend,” says Noffsinger. “We use position, distance, handler angle and all the other tactics of low-stress handling to move cattle correctly out of one corner into the holding area, for instance. This takes a lot of the stress and challenges out of using portable fences. Cattle don’t want to hit a fence. It’s painful.”

If an animal hits the fence, he notes, it’s a sign that the human handlers were doing something wrong.

“One rancher asked Bud Williams what the best building material would be for a corral,” Noffsinger says. “Bud replied by saying the best material was some really loose old woven wire with a 1-by-4 board over the top of it. If you broke that down, you’d know you were putting too much pressure on the cattle.”

Advantage of two round pens

Veterinarian Kip Lukasiewicz, Sandhills Cattle Consultants, Production Animal Consultation, had a lot of experience with portable facilities in his earlier cow-calf practice in Ainsworth, Neb.

“We had more than 45,000 cows in



PHOTO COURTESY OF TITAN WEST INC.

Hauled to the cattle on a panel carrier, commercial portable corral systems of various sizes are available and can be set up in a matter of minutes.

that practice and did a lot of pregnancy checks, Bang's vaccinations, etc. All our work was done out on the ranches or in the pastures. I got to see a lot of different portable corral systems. Most of them utilized portable panels; the ranchers pulled a panel carrier out to the pasture with them," says Lukasiewicz.

"Some would just set up a circular pen, and sort calves back out to the pasture from that pen, and leave the cows in. We'd preg-check the cows and then turn them out. That worked, but was never as efficient as two circular pens," he says.

Many people set up the portable corral system beside a pasture fence, using it for a wing to aim them into the corral. Lukasiewicz says this method works well, but adds that you can set up a corral anywhere, even in the middle of a huge pasture, if it is level enough. It's not difficult to guide cattle to the corral if they are handled properly.

Once the cattle are coming into the facility, if you are using a set-up with two round corrals and put the cattle into one, always have the gates open for them to go into the other circle, he advises.

"I've found that once we get the cattle in there, it works best to have the crew move the cattle to one side and then handle everything from the front rather than trying to push the cattle from behind," he shares.

When moving cattle from one circle to the other, using the transition area between, Lukasiewicz says stand between the cattle and where you want them to go. From that position, ask the cattle to voluntarily move to the other pen.

"Don't try to push them in there. Always ask from the front. Pushing cattle is counterproductive," he emphasizes. "If you want them to go readily, you let the leaders come around and go the proper direction, and the rest of the cattle will follow in a natural flow."

Whether you're talking about cattle or people, individuals tend to be more willing to do something if they think it is their idea, Lukasiewicz explains. "If someone tells us we should do something, and it wasn't our idea, we always have some question in our mind, or reluctance, and are looking for something different instead. It's the same with cattle. If it's their idea, they feel it's the best thing to do."

Lukasiewicz explains that handlers let the cattle flow into the next pen, then ask them to move back into the first pen — the one the cattle first came into. From there, the handlers started the sorting

process to sort calves away from the cows. As they circle around, the cows go down one alley into a pen, and the calves can go underneath a panel where the bottom rail is removed so calves will readily fit through alongside the cows, and then the calves are in another pen."

With this method, one or two people can sort a herd quickly, with no stress on the animals. The cattle sort themselves.

"We generally sort cow-calf pairs that way, and if we are vaccinating everything, we always vaccinate the calves first," says Lukasiewicz. "We put them through the alley with the Bud Box. We do the calves first because they want to stay where mom is. If we do the cows first and turn them out, they will be around either side of the two round pens, and the calves want to be

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near mom and don't move very well when we try to put them through. If the calves know they are going back to where mom was when we separated them, we can easily take the calves right by the alley where mom is standing, and they are so willing to go down through there. It's not much effort."

Cattle savvy

The most important thing is understanding cattle behavior.

"They always want to see what's pressuring them. Some people use portable tubs and alleys, and these work fine as long as they are open on the sides so cattle can see through them. This improves the

overall flow when cattle are going down the alley and into the tub," he says.

If a person has never tried a Bud Box, this is a good place to start, Lukasiewicz says. "This is so simple to set up and use; there's no reason not to try it. This will fit on your portable panel carrier and you can create it from portable panels. Little things

like this can greatly improve the way people work cattle," he says.

Commercial portable systems that can be set up very easily in a pasture are also available.

"Some large systems are on hydraulics and easy to set up for larger operations. Even a small operation could afford one if two or three neighbors share it," says Lukasiewicz.

Where neighbors work together to process cattle, partnering on a portable corral set-up may make sense, he says. "This is something a rancher might only use two or three times a year, but if neighbors went in together on it and use it six or more times a year and split the cost, it becomes affordable."



Editor's Note: Heather Smith Thomas is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Salmon, Idaho.

Commercial setups

Some ranchers still haul portable fence panels out to pastures on a truck to make a temporary corral, but today commercial corral systems are available from companies such as OK Corral, Rawhide Corrals, Diamond W Corral and Priefert Manufacturing (sponsor of the 2016 Angus Convention giveaway) to name a few.

Corral set-ups come in various sizes and configurations, says Todd Perkins, general manager of Titan West Inc. Livestock Handling Equipment.

"Big is not always better, and a person should select the size that best fits their needs," he says, noting options for corrals that hold 50, 80-100 or 160-200 cows. "The larger corrals take more labor to set up and sort cattle out of. Our mid-size OK Original is still the most popular. One person can set it up in 10 minutes or less, and two people can do it in five minutes."

Unhooking from the pickup is optional, Perkins says. "You just pull into the pasture, swing open the gate system to create the corral, and you are ready to gather cattle."

Perkins says permanent corral systems are an option, but a rancher can get a lot of money tied up in them.

"If a person needs to be able to work cattle in multiple locations, or on a leased ranch, they may not want a permanent facility," he says.

Utilizing the Bud Box in a corral setup

A Bud Box facilitates low-stress handling of cattle because it allows ranchers to take advantage of natural tendencies:

1. Cattle tend to follow other cattle.
2. Cattle tend to exit a pen at the same point they entered.
3. Cattle respond when they can easily see what is pressuring them.

You can visualize how a Bud Box works by moving a cow through the system. As she is brought into the Bud Box, she has to stop when she reaches the end of it. At this point, you enter the Bud Box and close the gate, standing in front of the exit lane. When the cow reaches the end of the box, she'll want to turn back and leave the box at the same point that she entered. As she turns, she will be facing you, but if you are positioned properly in front of the box exit, the cow can see the exit.

Utilizing low-stress handling techniques, you apply pressure to the cow by your position, timing, angle and speed of approach toward her. You can add pressure by taking a few steps toward the cow. As pressure on the cow grows due to your approach, she wants to remove this pressure by moving past you and into the exit.

Once the cow starts toward the box exit, you continue to walk past the cow. From this position, the cow can easily keep an eye on you (the pressure) and also see the opening, which allows for the release of that pressure as she heads into it.

The cow is moving in an arc around you, while you are working inside a circle relative to the cow. Working inside the circle is a good stockmanship technique because it allows the cow to always see your position and watch your movements. The design of the Bud Box assists in keeping the cow and the handler in correct position relative to each other and to the exit from the pen.

With more than one cow in a Bud Box, movement and position of the person is the same. Groups of cattle provide an additional benefit because cows tend to follow other cows.

The key is to pressure properly

to get the first cow moving toward the exit. When she starts to move toward the exit, don't make any movements that stop her from moving forward. If you walk parallel with a cow, you tend to slow her down, so do not walk with the cow. Stay

inside the curve created by the cow's movement toward the exit.

Patience is important. You must allow a little time for cattle to understand the process, but once they figure it out, they flow through it very readily. It is

counterproductive to force cows out of a Bud Box, but very safe and efficient to allow them to initiate their own movement out of the box and into the truck, trailer or chute.

— Commentary by Heather Smith Thomas