

Built-in Comfort for Man and Beast

Commercial cattleman replaces old handling facility with updated system.



Alan Graybeal of Dublin, Va., has made a new handling facility the heart of his grazing system.

Story & photos by
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It's a cold, windy December morning in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, but Alan Graybeal and his crew are comfortable as they wrap up artificially inseminating (AIing) a group of beef cows. A year ago, Graybeal wouldn't have felt so relaxed after handling a group of cows.

In 2008, the commercial cattleman from Dublin, Va., built a 44 × 90-foot (ft.) steel-sided building to house a new cattle handling system for his 450-cow beef herd.

"Before building this facility, we worked cattle in a pole barn with open sides. When the wind blew 30 miles per hour and snow swirled through the barn, the pole barn wasn't a comfortable place to handle cattle," Graybeal says.

As he considered building a system, Graybeal studied cattle handling techniques and decided to buy his equipment from WW Manufacturing Co. of Thomas, Okla.

"For us to assist in designing a system for a producer, we need to know how many animals he is working, what

practices he performs on the animals, how much sorting capability he needs and how the animal comes into the system," says Van Medley of WW Manufacturing, who helped Graybeal plan his facility.

Cattle flow is the key

With design help from WW, Graybeal arranged a horseshoe-shaped handling system to take advantage of a cow's natural instinct to circle and follow herdmates. Cattle flow is improved when animals can't see objects or people in front of them. After the cows enter Graybeal's building, they move into a large round tub where they're guided up an alley by a 12-ft.-long sweep gate.

The alley leading from the tub to the squeeze chute has solid side panels above a cow's line of sight. The solid sides block a cow's ability to see distractions outside the alley, but workers can reach the animals to apply pour-on dewormers or perform other jobs that don't require restraint of individual animals. Some facilities with taller solid panels use catwalks to give workers access to cattle in the alleyway.

Research shows that cattle balk at entering shadowed or dark areas. In

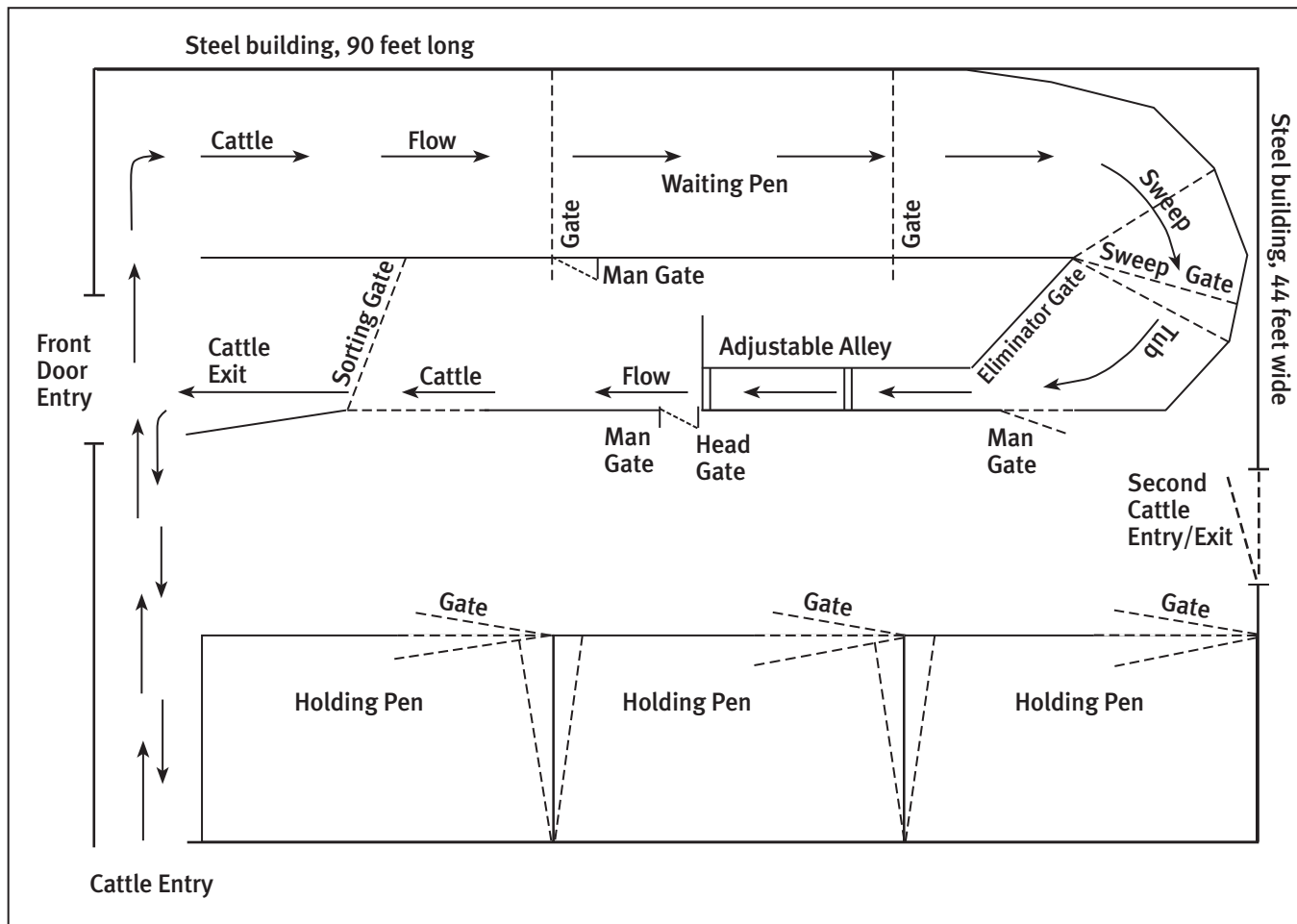
Graybeal's facility, overhead fluorescent lights provide excellent light for working cattle without causing shadows. Slippery areas also spook cattle and make injuries more likely. The base of the building floor is dirt, but Graybeal filled the handling area with 4 inches (in.) of crusher run gravel topped by 2 in. of fine stone material. The stone material gives the animals traction to move smoothly through the facility. To improve footing in a critical area, Graybeal is pouring concrete under the squeeze chute and giving it a rough surface.

Scale provides performance data

The squeeze chute is equipped with an electronic scale so the Virginia cattleman can obtain performance data and monitor weight gains for calves during the backgrounding period. To store his cattle records and have them handy on a computer, Graybeal is building a farm office in the entry of the building.

To take advantage of the superior genetics provided by AI breeding, Graybeal retains ownership of his calves through a Kansas feedlot. As his calves are processed at weaning, the calves are

Fig. 1: Alan Graybeal's cattle handling facility



Online help

Since 2001, Kentucky has invested \$21,383,176 to help producers improve cattle handling facilities. The money became available following a settlement between the state and tobacco companies. The investment in handling facilities has helped Kentucky become the largest beef cattle state east of the Mississippi River, according to Angela Blank, director of communications, of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy.

In a publication titled *Cattle Handling Facilities: Planning, Components and Layout*, University of Kentucky researchers estimate that a system for a 50-cow herd may cost \$5,000-\$7,000. If a good cattle handling facility encourages a producer to improve herd health and marketing practices, the researchers say the producer could recover facility costs in five to seven years.

Of course, the rate of return depends on the producer's level of management before installing the handling facility and improvement in animal health due to additional herd health practices. To see this publication, visit www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/aen/aen82/aen82.pdf.

dewormed, vaccinated and equipped with electronic identification (EID) ear tags for individual animal identification.

The ability to trace animals back to the farm of origin along with verification through a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process-Verified Program (PVP) recognized by the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) makes Graybeal's cattle eligible for export and for source-verified marketing programs. He also receives premiums based on the animals' ability to meet *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) requirements. In recent years, the premiums Graybeal has received for process-verified animals have averaged \$25-\$45 per head.

In the heart of the grazing system

The new barn is centrally located in Graybeal's 600-acre rotational grazing system, and the handling facility has become the hub of beef management. All of the cows are worked twice a year when they are dewormed and receive prebreeding vaccinations. The cows also pass through the chute in two groups each year for AI.

Graybeal manages a spring-calving herd and a fall-calving herd. The Angus crossbred cows are primarily bred to Angus bulls selected from the Select Sires stud lineup.

In addition to the working facility, two large pens in the building are ideal for holding cows that have difficulty calving or for nursing sick animals back to health.

After making a large investment in a

handling facility, Graybeal is extremely happy with the results. But it's difficult for him to express the value of an efficient handling system in terms of dollars returned on his investment.

"The biggest difference is in our comfort level and improved safety for us and the cattle," the Virginia beef producer says. "I can't say that we've added any herd health practices or changed our management. We made the old facility in the pole barn work for a long time and we handled a lot of cattle through it. But after a morning of working cattle, I don't regret my investment in this new handling system at all."



This first-calf heifer is an example of the improved genetics provided by AI and Angus sires.

Handling facility checklist

The first trip through a working facility affects the long-term behavior of cattle during future handling activities. This long-term benefit makes the setup and flow of a handling system extremely important on cow-calf operations.

Here are the key points in Virginia cattleman Alan Graybeal's handling system:

- ▶ Curved alleyways take advantage of a cow's instinct to circle and follow herdmates.
- ▶ Overhead lighting prevents shadows and bright spots.
- ▶ Non-slip materials provide excellent footing and keep animals moving forward.
- ▶ Squeeze chute controls animals for vaccinations and health treatments.
- ▶ Solid sides on alleyway keep animals from being distracted by movement to the side.
- ▶ Sweep gate contributes to smooth flow of animals through the system.
- ▶ Scales record animal performance and contribute to recordkeeping.