

# Handling System is the



**Above:** Natalie and Len Wester select replacement heifers from the preconditioning facility at Wester Farms.

## Smooth animal flow speeds up tough jobs.

Story & photos by  
**BOYD KIDWELL**

Wester Farm of Louisburg, N.C., has earned a reputation for selling big, healthy calves that climb off a truck and head straight to the feedbunk. To make the farm's preconditioning operation efficient, Len Wester designed a handling system as the heart of his cow-calf operation.

Wester manages 550 Angus-Gelbvieh commercial cows bred to Angus bulls with expected progeny differences (EPDs) for low birth weight and high growth. At weaning, the calves weigh 650-725 pounds (lb.), and Wester backgrounds them to 800-900 lb. before selling uniform truckloads of feeder cattle through video auctions.

On weaning day, Wester moves 100 calves into a holding pen connected to the working facility stocked with high-quality hay, clean water and shade. The day after separation from cows, the calves are vaccinated and dewormed.

The calves are also equipped with electronic identification (eID) tags. On the day of processing, the Wester Farm crew vaccinates, deworms and tags 100 head in 30 minutes.

To move through the handling system, calves pass from the holding

corral down a narrow alley and into the tub/sweepgate made by WW Livestock. The tub/sweepgate turns the cattle 270 degrees and sends the animals into a small holding pen. From there, calves move through a chute where their weight is recorded on a Gallagher electronic scale. They then move into the Cowco manual headgate.

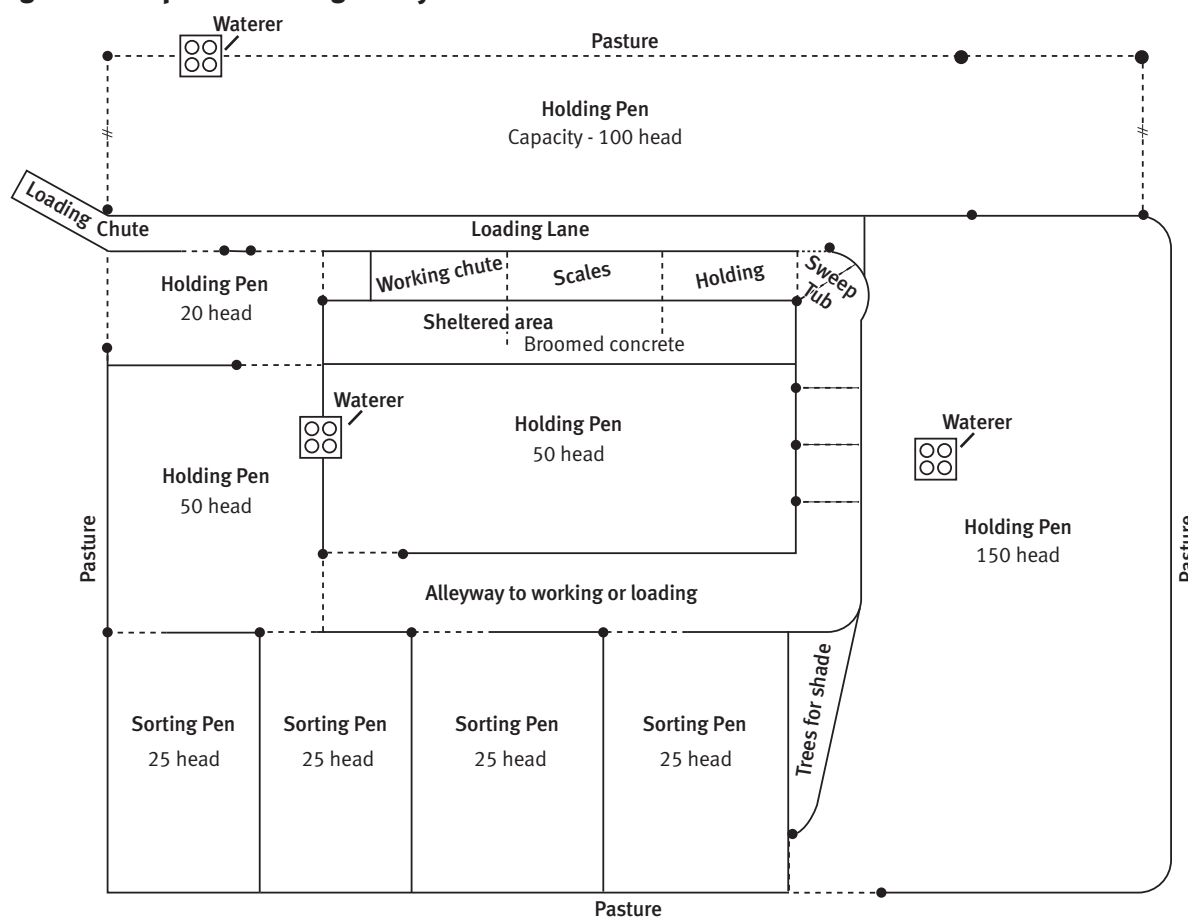
"I looked at handling systems from several manufacturers, and there were things I liked more about pieces of equipment from different companies, so I used the best pieces from each company to design my own system," Wester says.

### Round out corners

Wester designed the handling system and holding pen layout with a capacity for 250 head. One of the unique aspects of the facility is that Wester rounded the corrals by using three posts at each corner. Rounded corners keep animals from lodging and piling up.

The calves remain in the holding pen for a week and receive a ration of soyhulls, corn gluten, Bovatec® and calcium. After the calves settle down, Wester moves them to pastures with a backgrounding ration fed in large tire feeders. He then moves another group into the

**Fig. 1: Wester preconditioning facility illustrated**



All corners are rounded for less congestion. Dotted lines are swing or slide gates. Capacities are based on 800 lb. per head.

### Equipment for a smooth handling system

To design this handling facility, Len Wester selected equipment from:

- Tub/sweepgate — WW Livestock  
[www.wvmanufacturing.com](http://www.wvmanufacturing.com)
- Electronic scale — Gallagher  
[www.gallagherusa.com](http://www.gallagherusa.com)
- Manual headgate — Cowco  
[www.cowcoinc.com](http://www.cowcoinc.com)
- eID tags and reader wand — Allflex  
[www.allflexusa.com/eid/readers.php](http://www.allflexusa.com/eid/readers.php)

Wester Farm markets cattle in video sales through Southeast Livestock Exchange ([www.southeastlivestockexchange.com](http://www.southeastlivestockexchange.com)).

# Heart of this Cattle Farm



Cattle head down an alleyway into the sweep tub.



A WW Livestock sweep gate/tub turns cattle and heads them into the headgate/scales area.

preconditioning lot and weans all of the calves over a month.

To keep costs low, Wester's backgrounding ration is primarily homegrown corn silage fed in grass pastures. The calves gain 2 to 3 lb. per day and Wester's cost per pound of gain is 46¢ per pound in the backgrounding phase.

In the past two years, high feed prices have sparked interest from feedlots in buying heavy feeders, and loads of Wester Farm steers sold in 2009 for prices ranging from \$94 per hundredweight (cwt.) (900-weight steers) to \$96.80 per cwt. (850-lb. steers). A load of heifers averaging 725 lb. sold for \$93.80 per cwt. These cattle were sold in a July 2009 video auction for delivery in October and November. Despite the drop in cattle prices during 2009, Wester says the market for 800- to 900-lb. cattle has held up well relative to prices for 500- to 600-lb. non-preconditioned calves.

"At times, we've been tempted to sell our calves at weaning, but so far the numbers say preconditioning pays off," Wester says.

## Reduce shrink and make a name

Wester's daughter, Natalie, is his right hand in the cattle operation and helps process the calves at weaning. Ask Natalie Wester why preconditioning is important

and the 20-year-old cattlegirl replies, "Calves lose so much weight when you pull them directly off the cows and take them to a stockyard. Preconditioning helps calves stay healthy and make a name for you with buyers."

Research by Clemson University backs up Natalie's contention that preconditioning reduces the weight loss (shrink) from stress calves suffer when delivered to sale barns right off the cow. In 2008, the shrink from preconditioned calves shipped 1,200 miles from Clemson's Edisto Station to an Iowa feedlot averaged 2.5% compared to 5% for abruptly weaned calves shipped only 35 miles to a stockyard. Based on these results, an abruptly weaned calf that weighs 500 lb. at the farm could lose 25 lb. by the time it's sold at a local stockyard.

Preconditioned cattle are also good deals for buyers. Research shows that sick animals in feedlots cost an average of \$92 per head in treatment and lost production. Treatment costs average \$29 per head and lost production runs \$63 per head. In a survey, Texas feedlot operators anticipated a sickness rate of 9% for preconditioned calves compared to 36% for non-preconditioned calves. The feedlot operators expected a death loss of 1.5% for preconditioned cattle compared to 4% for non-preconditioned animals.

**Below:** Natalie Wester prepares to vaccinate a calf as preconditioning begins.

**Right:** There's very little stress on cattle processed quickly through the handling facility. An eID tag (left ear) provides data quickly.



weights, shows up on the screen. Computer records are handy culling tools, and we cull heavily," Len says. "Source and age verification is becoming a big deal with cattle buyers, and we see enough return on our feeder calves to justify the investment in eID tags."

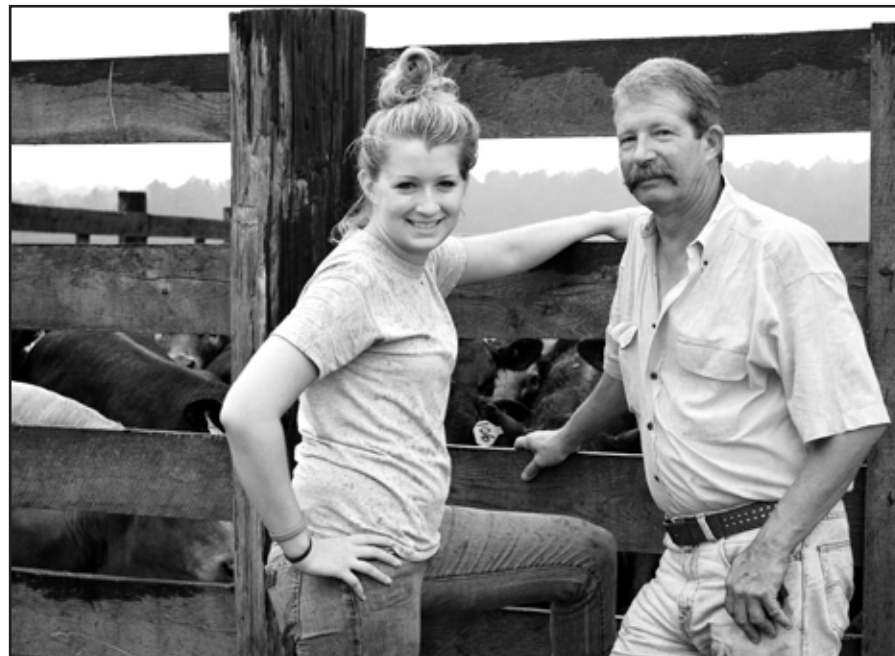
It has taken Wester Farm several years to build a top-notch cow-calf operation. By combining excellent genetics, low-cost feed and the ability to market truckloads, Len and Natalie Wester are capitalizing on a reputation for selling healthy preconditioned cattle. Smooth-working handling facilities play a key role in the preconditioning operation.

"I've done some figuring, and most of the profit from my cow-calf operation comes from preconditioning and backgrounding the calves. A cow has only one calf born each year, and I want to make every dollar I can off that calf," Wester says.

## Picking replacements

As heifers pass through the scales and chute, Natalie notes potential female replacements. Wester Farm keeps 100 heifers for its herd and sells 50 to 100 replacement heifers to other producers. All of the cows and heifers are equipped with eID tags and the Westers have a reader wand that transfers the cow's data to a laptop computer while the animal is in the headgate. That information is used in culling decisions and as a tool in selecting replacement heifers.

"We wave the magic wand and the cow's history, including previous calf



A smooth-working handling facility helps earn a good name for cattle from Wester Farms.