

Equipment Is Pricey, But Life Is Priceless

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



Working cattle is not a simple process. In days of yesteryear, a horse or two, a good rope and a snubbing post would encompass most of a day's cattle work. Cattle were, and still are, pastured in larger pastures or paddocks and gathered for an annual sort, cull and sell process.

The incentive to remove cattle is generally covered by the demand or price currently being offered or the limitation of resources, most often not enough feed. In today's environment, the pending national ID system which is proposed in a program called the United States Animal Identification Plan (USAIP), the encouragement to be able to better track cattle, along with the general desire to market source verified beef certainly brings to light the question, "Are my working facilities suitable and will they meet the needs of increased expectations or demands?"

This is a two-pronged question. The first thought is suitability of facilities and the sheer capacity to get the job done. But a second question certainly needs to be asked "Are the facilities safe, not only for the livestock, but also for those helping along the side of the chute?"

Working livestock is a high-risk operation. According to the National Ag Safety Database, injuries related to livestock rank second only to machinery related accidents. Although relatively calm, peaceful and relaxed, cattle, when forced into uncomfortable or unfamiliar surroundings, can inflict serious harm to a livestock producer or chute side help.

The sheer massiveness of cattle is something to be reckoned with. In their effort to escape, cattle may literally crush equipment or people. Memories of dangerous situations are never easy to forget.

At the NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center, we work cattle on a continuous basis. As I look back, situations that appeared to be opportunities were recipes for disaster. Often due to budget constraints, equipment was over repaired and obviously past any facsimile of useful life.

Replacement pieces were always "low bid" and a piece of wire, an oddball panel or fence post was positioned to guide the needed days work to completion. Oftentimes cows were gently coaxed through the system, weights were taken and a sigh of relief was released when the wild ones actually

paused long enough to record their weights.

One thing about cows, if they want to escape, the check is usually made with the nose as all 1300 pounds of force is applied to the weakest point in the chute. The cow will quickly decide if any give in the chute is achieved. If none is detected, the cow will generally settle down and wait for the door to open on its own. If any give is detected, the force is doubled or tripled and all attention is focused on escaping.

There is a particular moment that still sticks in my mind as a personal turning point in regards to livestock safety. As always, cattle were being guided into a fairly solid chute followed by an electronic scale platform encased in a makeshift cage. The cow detected give in the crate, forced herself through the created opening and shoved the remaining crate against the back of the pickup, where a coworker was standing.

Unable to see the back of the pickup, the feeling of not knowing the fate of my coworker can't be described. At first glance, no space remained between the chute and pickup; the end gate was capable of crushing any one in the way.

Fortunately, when the dust had settled and the cow was long gone, the coworker emerged, having quickly jumped aside, allowing the flying crate to impact the pickup and not cause any bodily harm. As some would say, a near miss. Life goes on, so get the next cow in the chute because supper is waiting.

Yet, the feeling of not knowing, the fear of death and injury, all encased the environment long enough to realize, life is too short. Equipment may be pricey, but life is priceless.

Do not shortchange your family or chute side help. Equipment purchases will be needed to USAIP ear tag your cattle.

May you find all your USAIP ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0183.

Equipment is Pricey, but Life is

Priceless

