West Virginia Pasture Management

Animal Handling Facilities

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for W.Va. Grassland Limited Resource Farmer Program

Objective
To create an awareness of some basic facilities that will assist farmers with their livestock/grazing businesses.

Introduction
Handling facilities are defined as any structures and or equipment that will assist the farmer in managing a livestock grazing business. All of the management practices are easier to do and more likely to be done if animals can be handled safely and easily.

Necessities
The following should be considered as basic facility needs:

1. Headgate
2. Chute
3. Holding pens
4. Fencing designed to move cattle effectively and efficiently from fields to facilities.

Design Tips
1. **Headgate** - should be sturdy enough to restrain your largest animal. "Automatic catch" headgates are acceptable for stocker cattle that will only be on the farm a few months. Mature cows however become "wise" and will eventually refuse to approach the headgate that will automatically catch them. Manually operated headgates that will open wide usually work better for mature animals. Avoid headgates that hinge in the center to form a "V." This design is more likely to choke an animal if it attempts to lay down in the chute. On the other hand, if the animal raises its head quickly, it can escape.

2. **Chute** - The chute should be designed to be compatible with the headgate. The chute area is where "the work gets done." It should allow easy, safe, access to all parts of the animal. A wide variety of designs are available. Look for a design that you personally trust your safety to. Do not become enthralled by a jungle of cables and ropes that look fancy. Just be sure it works. Chutes that have a squeeze feature improve safety but cost more.

3. **Holding Pens** - The more pens you have the more options you have when handling your livestock. Do not make them too large. Arrange them so that cattle tend to naturally move to the next closest pen to the working chute and headgate. Hang the gates on each pen so that they swing behind the animals and close as the animals enter the pen.
4. Fencing - Fencing leading to the pens should be designed to "funnel" the animals toward the pens. Each area that the animals move into should be smaller than the area from which they just moved.

5. Making the Pieces Work - Each part of the handling facility has a specific function. Coordinating and connecting the parts properly is important. A variety of designs for alleys and chutes are available from commercial suppliers and your local extension office. A slightly curved arrangement facilitates livestock movement. Cattle have an instinct to move in a circular direction. Avoid long, straight chutes and alleys. Keep chutes and alleys to a width less than 26 inches.

Summary

Every livestock/grazing business needs certain tools to be profitable. Among the list are handling facilities. They may be permanently constructed at a specific site on the farm. Or, they may be portable to allow movement to different sites within the farm operation. The principles of how they should function are the same. Design specifics and blueprints are available at your local extension office.

Where to Get Help

For more information about animal handling facilities, contact your local office of the Soil Conservation Service or the West Virginia University Extension Service. They are listed in the telephone directory under "U.S. Government" and "West Virginia," respectively.