

Cattle Handling Pointers

R. Gill, Ph.D and R. Machen, Ph.D., Professors and Extension Livestock Specialists

Safe and effective cattle handling has always been important. In the last few years there has been a move toward what has been called low-stress handling or as we prefer to call it a return to sound effective stockmanship. The animal industries cannot afford to allow any form of abusive behavior or handling of livestock. The culture of handling on any operation originates from upper management and is expressed by the workers on the ground.

Most cattle handlers, and it does not matter if you are a “cowboy, buckaroo, cow hand, cow man, farm hand or stockman”, have learned by watching someone else work stock. Everyone thinks they know how to “work cattle” because they have always been able to get the job done. The moment you admit you do not know everything is the moment you can start to get better.

If you have had a thought similar to this one “that stupid ole’ cow” you have room to improve your abilities as a stockman. Cattle are not stupid and usually do what they are asked to do. However, if ask incorrectly cattle will not necessarily do what you want or need them to do. When this happens we have come to rely on facilities, equipment or manpower to force them to do what is needed. This results in increased stress on cattle and hands and results in cattle getting more difficult to handle over time.

In a very simple explanation of stress... *If you decide to do something it is not stressful, if you are forced to do something it will be stressful.* Sound stockmanship allows one to get an animal to decide to do what you want them to do. Force does not come into play and stress is reduced.

The job of a stockman is to teach an animal to accept and tolerate pressure and stress for short periods of time. Effective stockmanship skills are based on pressure and release. An animal will quickly learn to accept pressure and not develop stress if they perceive a way for pressure to be released.

The role of a stockman is to create movement in cattle and then use position to control and manage that movement to the desired result. When cattle loose movement they become reluctant to work. When movement is lost excessive pressure, force and driving aids are more likely to be used. Creating and managing movement is key to achieving effective stockmanship.

There are five basic principles of cattle behavior that when used properly can improve the ease and speed of working cattle while reducing stress and increasing efficiency. Those principles are:

1. Cattle want to see you.

Understanding how cattle see is basic to getting cattle to respond to your position. Cattle can see everywhere but directly behind them or a small blind spot in front of them. When working from behind, it is important to keep moving side to side to prevent cattle from turning in an effort to keep you in their line of sight.

2. Cattle want to go around you.

This allows you to position yourself such that, when they do go around you, they are pointed directly at the gate or destination you had in mind. They'll think it was their idea to go there!

3. Cattle want to be with and will go to other cattle.

A herding instinct is natural among 'prey' animals. As stockmen we can take advantage of this natural instinct as we work from the front of cattle. If you start the front the back will follow.

4. Cattle want to return to where they have been.

The natural instinct of a cow is to return to the last safe or comfortable place they were. The simple principle of the return box or "Bud Box" helps capture and use this principle. It also works great in sorting and moving cattle from one corral to another.

5. Cattle can only process one main thought at a time.

If cattle are thinking about anything other than what you are asking them to do you will need to change their mind first before putting pressure on them.

There are three basic means of communicating with livestock. Very simply they are:

- **Sight**
- **Sound**
- **Touch**

Cattle prefer to communicate through line of sight. Sound coming from a human for the most part is stressful and marginally successful in getting the desired result. Sound should be used as a secondary method and only used when sight is not adequate. Sound can often lead to distracting the line of sight away from the desired direction. Touch is really only useful in situations where animals are confined and additional stimulus is needed to get cattle to move or respond. Touch does not refer to use of driving aids such as hotshots or sorting sticks or paddles.

Keeping these behavioral principles and methods of communicating in mind, following is a list of ten handling pointers to keep in mind and a few suggestions that will improve the ease of handling cattle, whether they are being gathered from the pasture or processed through the corrals.

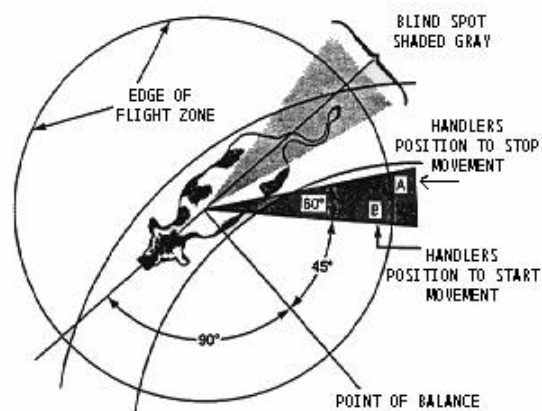
1. "The only way to work cattle quickly is slowly."

(from a humorous book entitled *Don't Squat With Your Spurs On.*) Patience is a great virtue when gathering and working cattle. When we get in a hurry, inevitably we put excessive or incorrect pressure on cattle, which usually results in an unintended reaction from the cattle.

2. Work from the front to draw cattle to you.

This goes back to the basic principle #1. Cattle can be easily controlled from the front if they are not afraid of a human. (If they are afraid you are a long way away from being able to handle cattle using low stress principles). Working from the front helps keep cattle from wanting to turn in an effort to keep you in their line of sight. By moving in and out of the flight zone and point of balance, cattle can be easily drawn forward and past you to get them to go where you need them to go.

The most important point to remember about the flight zone is not the flight zone, it is the area before the flight zone where a stockman must get skilled at managing. When approaching an animal it is important to be able to predict the response to your entering the flight zone. If the desired movement is not going to occur you need to back out reposition and approach at a different angle.



Where each animal's point of balance falls varies greatly and is influenced by pressure from front or behind, draw of cattle ahead or behind them and whether or not they are comfortable going by the handler. Suffice it to say that the point of balance on any given animal is not where it is drawn on this diagram. The point of balance is actually related to the position you are in relative to the eye.

3. Apply pressure when cattle have a place to go.

Low stress livestock handling is not about handling cattle with no pressure. In fact the success of handling cattle correctly depends on knowing when and where to apply pressure and how much pressure to apply. The other key component to effective stockmanship is setting the cattle up to go where you want them to go before you apply pressure. Just as important is to release the pressure as soon as the desired result is achieved.

4. Pressure from the side.

This relates back to working from the front and down the side of an animal and not working from directly behind.

5. Cattle must be comfortable to go by you and stay straight.

If cattle are not comfortable going by you, they will not work for you very well. Working from the front requires you to get the cattle able to pass you without balking or spooking. This simple principle facilitates penning, sorting and processing cattle.

The further forward you can make an animal's point of balance the easier it is to work and sort cattle. That is why using the draw of other cattle makes it easier to work and sort cattle in an alley or from one corral to another.

6. Pressure cattle from behind only when absolutely necessary.

Like any 'prey' animal, cattle cannot see directly behind themselves. If you assume a position directly behind cattle (in their blind spot), they will turn to one side or the other in order to see you. To 'drive' cattle in a straight line, assume a position behind their point of balance (shoulder) and off to either side. You can also work in a zig-zag fashion behind the cattle causing them to switch eyes and move straight forward.

7. When working cattle, move in triangles.

Sounds odd, but it works. Move in straight lines. For example, if you work in an arch pattern behind the cattle, you will find them being drawn from side to side (and consequently walking in a zig-zag pattern) as they follow your movement. Move into their flight zone to create or correct movement. Retreat from their flight zone to slow or stop movement.

8. Going with the flow of cattle slows them down or stops their movement.

It's all about that point of balance – as you move in the same direction cattle are traveling, when you approach a position parallel to their point of balance, they will slow down, and as you pass the point of balance they will stop. The important part in this process is to get the cattle to stop without reversing their direction. Teach them to stop straight and stay in the position they were headed.

9. Going against the flow of cattle initiates or accelerates their movement.

The opposite of pointer # 8. Ever filled the chute, then pressured the last animal in line to move the others forward? It's likely he or she had no place to go and nothing happened. Next time, try leaving their flight zone, walk up ahead of the line, then re-enter the flight zone of the first in line and walk alongside the chute, front to back, and see what happens. We suspect that as you pass their point of balance, they will step forward. The one in the front will 'pull' the others forward.

10. Cattle work best when *they* are ready - You have to get them there.

Cattle are not mind readers. You have to teach, condition and prepare them. Unfortunately, today's cattle owners are short on time and experienced labor, and consequently, don't spend time with their cattle as did the stockmen of days gone by. Perhaps there's not time to educate the entire existing herd, but quality time spent with replacement heifers will pay dividends for years to come. Spend time with heifers (in both the pasture and the pens) when you *want* to, not just when you *have* to.

Numerous others will handle your cattle after they have left your care. Bad habits and unruly behavior in cattle and humans is learned. When working correctly shouting, whistling, poking and prodding cattle is unnecessary and counterproductive. In fact, they distract cattle from what you really want them to do. Development of effective stockmanship skills is about improving worker safety, animal performance and increasing income on each individual operation.

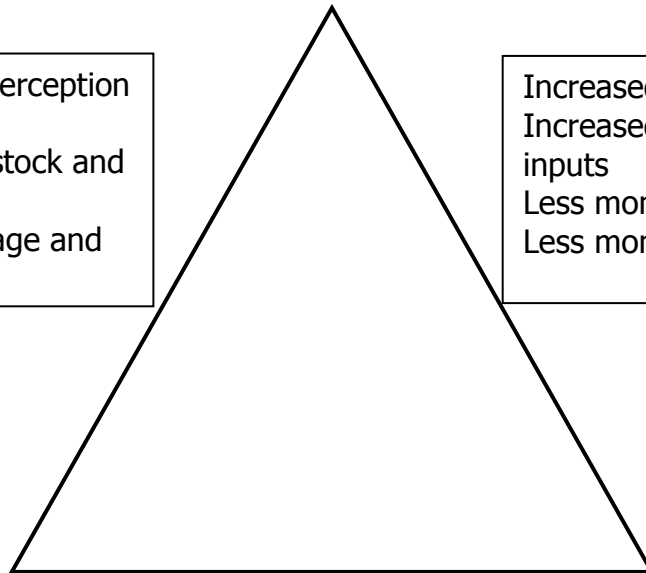
WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT To YOU and the BEEF CATTLE INDUSTRY

Welfare

Improved public perception of cattle handling
Less injury to livestock and handlers
Less carcass damage and trim loss

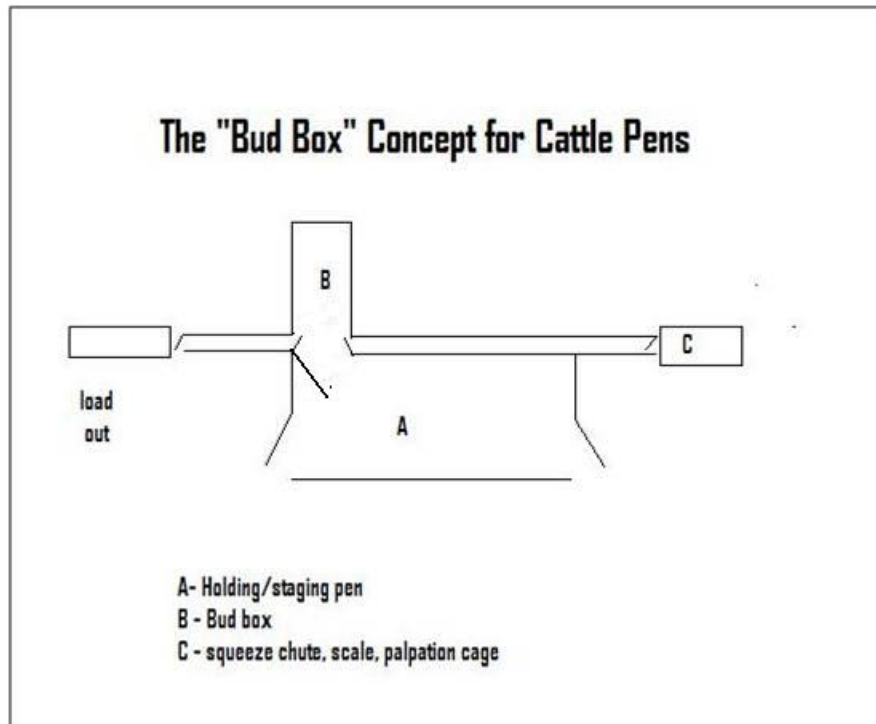
Performance

Increased efficiency
Increased gain without additional inputs
Less money on medicine/treatments
Less money for facilities



Quality of Life

Profitability
Sustaining family operations
Enjoyment of ranching lifestyle



There is nothing magical about a "Bud Box" or Return Box. The simplicity of the box is that it makes you, as a stockman, do things correctly. If you do not, cattle will not work any better out of a box than they will a tub. When handled correctly, however, they will work better out of a box than they will a tub system. If a box does not work **you** are doing something wrong! For more details on designing and using a Bud Box go to <http://animalscience.tamu.edu/academics/beef/publications/index.htm> and download ***Designing a Bud Box***

The reason the box works is that it takes advantage of all five basic principles of behavior. As cattle enter the box they come to the back of the box and transition to go back to where they came from (5), they can then easily see you (1), they can move around you (2), the draw of the leaders pull the rest of the cattle into the crowd alley (3) and this all occurs without force so they are free to think about what you are wanting them to do (4) without being distracted. It is that simple.

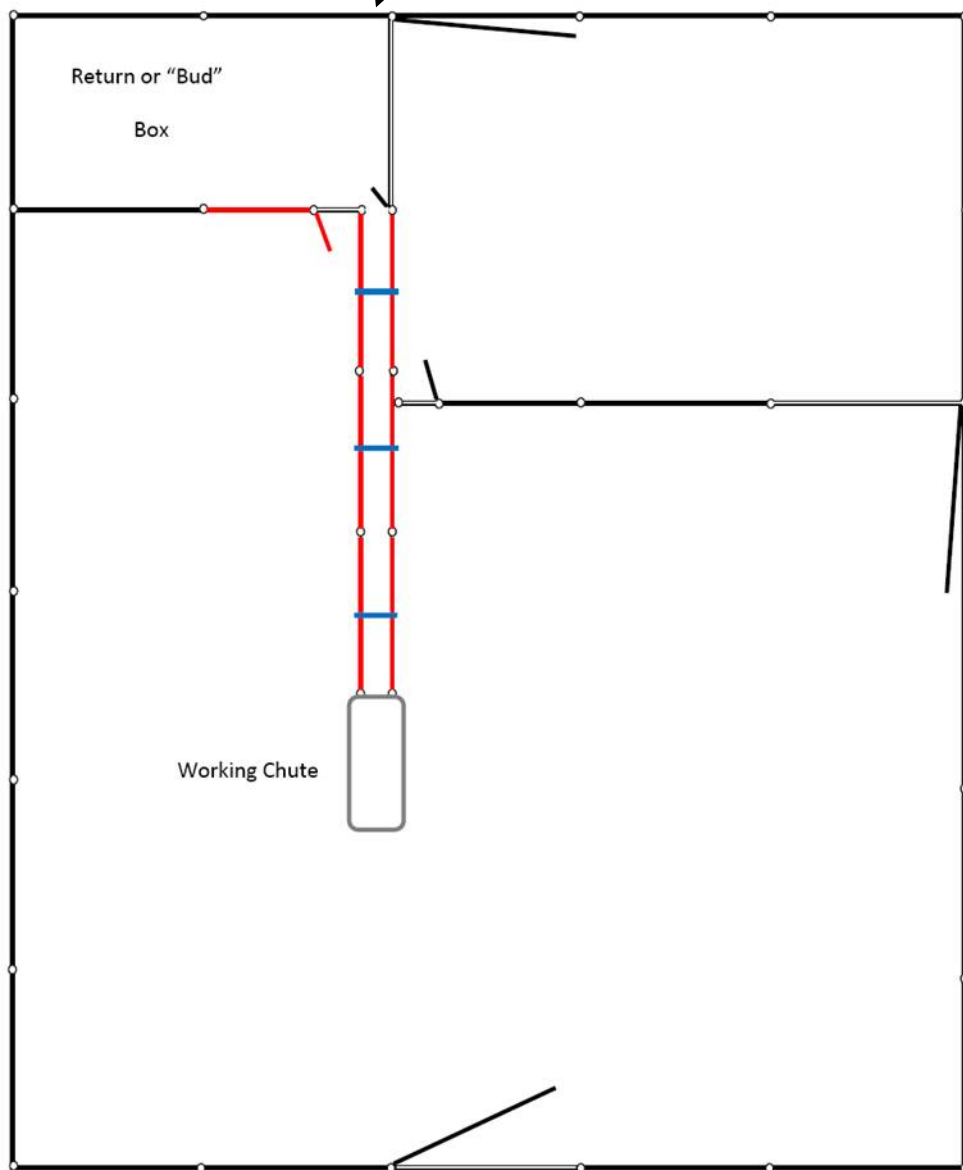
We encourage you to improve your skills as a stockman. For more information and additional training opportunities go to: <http://www.ranchtv.org> or <http://www.effectivestockmanship.com>

Contact information:

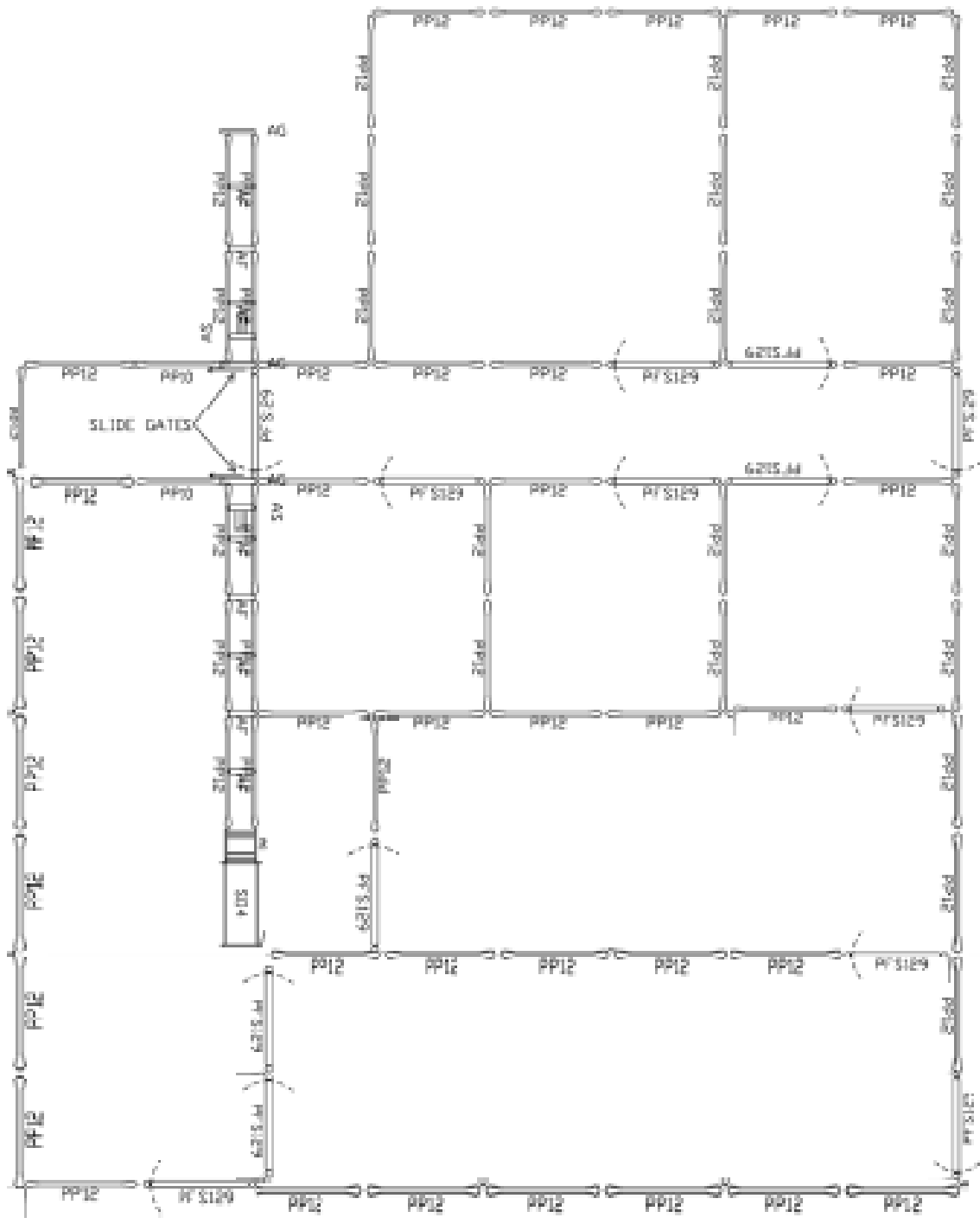
Ron Gill, Ph.D., Prof. and Livestock Specialist, Texas AgriLife Extension Service. College Station, Texas, Texas A&M System: Email: RGill@ag.tamu.edu Website: <http://beef.tamu.edu>.
 Rick Machen, Ph.D. Prof. and Livestock Specialist, Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Uvalde, Texas, Texas A&M System: Email: RMachen@ag.tamu.edu Website: <http://beef.tamu.edu>.

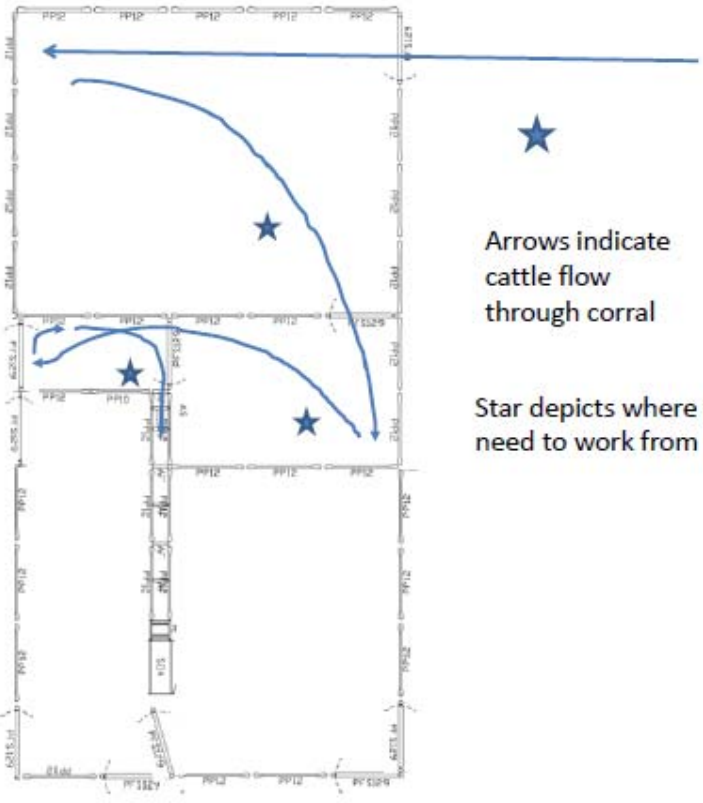
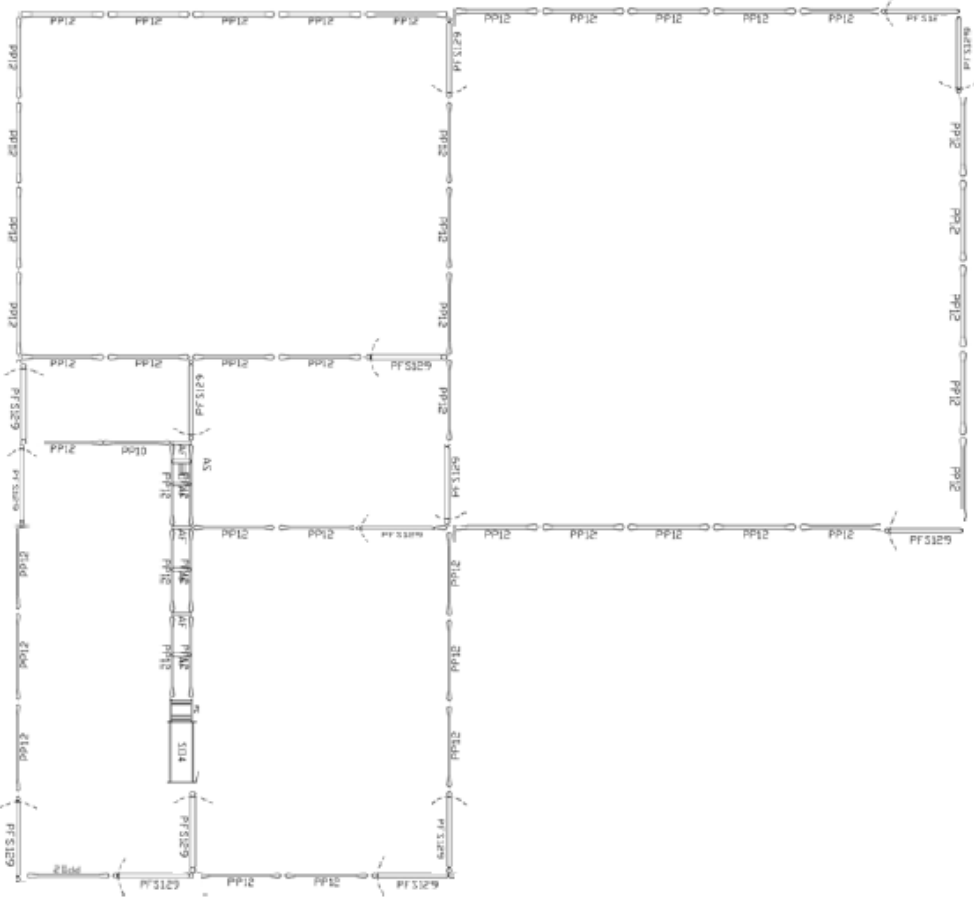
Other corral designs and layouts to consider. The latter two are expanded versions of the ones Priefert now have in their catalog.

An additional out gate could be added to facilitate a load out using the same Box.



Red = 10 ft; Blue = Alley Bows
Black = 12 ft Panels, Gates or Walk through Panels





Arrows indicate
cattle flow
through corral

Star depicts where you
need to work from