

Meet the cattle whisperer

By TOM J. BECHMAN

KEEGAN Poe is usually soft-spoken. That may come from years of working around his beef cattle. He believes in handling animals humanely, and he practices what he preaches.

Poe, of Franklin, operates a 25-cow Simmental herd and specializes in selling

Key Points

- A chute inside the barn makes conditions more conducive for working cattle.
- The ability to shut door after cattle enter cuts drafts and keeps building warmer.
- Solid, curved panels help prevent spooking cattle.

EASIER ACCESS: The palpation cage on the back end of this handling chute makes getting in to work on cows much easier, Keegan Poe notes.

freezer beef to neighbors. He also works full time off the farm. For many years, he worked calves and cattle in makeshift facilities, often on rented property. It



wasn't unusual to have to endure the elements if he wanted to process cattle.

He changed that a few years ago when he built a working facility on his property. "It may seem like more than I need for the size of the herd, but I certainly appreciate it after many years of working in less-than-ideal conditions," Poe says. "I always remember the first time I called the vet to come do pregnancy checks after I completed the new handling barn. It was a rainy day, and he called to make sure I was still doing it. When I told him we would work inside, he certainly perked up."

Custom-built facility

Poe designed the cattle handling facility himself. He included worker comforts, but he also put both the needs and welfare of the cattle as top priority. The actual headgate and working chute is inside a pole building. A chute made of panels leads to the headgate, but there's an overhead door that can be closed once cattle are inside the barn.

To make his system work, Poe reversed the tub, or loading area, of the corral. It's curved and made of solid metal at key places.

"They don't like to have corners, so we made sure we avoided them when possible," he says. "You also have to understand how they think and react. If you get into their flight zone when handling them, you can spook them."

That means getting too far forward as you walk alongside the animal, he notes. He's found it's best to speak softly and leave the cattle prod at the house if at all possible. Getting excited simply gets the cattle excited, Poe believes.

Many of the handling practices he tries to emulate were developed by animal behavioral experts over the last couple of decades. One of the most notable, Temple Grandin, of Colorado, has even visited Indiana Beef Cattle Association workshops in the past, talking about the need to handle cattle without a lot of fuss and commotion.



SOLID CURVES: Square corners and open-rail gates aren't the most desirable tools for moving and handling cattle, notes Keegan Poe. He prefers solid, curved metal panels for his corral.

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