
Animal Science

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Considerations When Selecting a Commercial Squeeze Chute

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Producers considering the purchase of a commercial squeeze chute have a number of factors to consider before making the final decision. A squeeze chute is a sizable investment for most producers. Since the squeeze chute plays such an important part in the management of the beef herd, it is critical that producers select the best available squeeze chute that will meet their needs. This is a too great an investment for a critical mistake to be made in the selection process.

General Considerations

Several things need to be considered when selecting a commercial chute. What type cattle operation will the unit be purchased for? If it is for a cow-calf operation there may need to be extra consideration given to the available adjustments that will allow working of both cows and calves. How much labor will be available when working animals? Limited labor availability may result in the need to purchase a self-catching headgate. Will the squeeze chute be placed in a permanent location or will a wheel kit be needed to move the chute? Will the location where the chute is to be used have adequate space for all components of the squeeze chute to work properly?

After evaluating the requirements for the chute, cost needs to be considered. There is a considerable range in price from a simple manual chute to a complete hydraulic chute. After the decision is made as to the amount of money that can be spent, it is time to start looking at features of available squeeze chutes. All chutes have the same basic features, however, the ease

of use and functionality can vary. Take time to operate all features to determine if they are easy to use. If a wheel kit will be purchased, detach and reattach the wheel kit before the check is written. A wheel kit that is uncomfortable for you to use should not be purchased.

Headgates

When evaluating the squeeze chute, a decision must be made about the type headgate that will be attached. Most chutes available in Tennessee come equipped with either a self-catching or a scissors type headgate. If a producer is working cattle alone the self-catching maybe the headgate of choice. It must be remembered that this type headgate must be adjusted properly so the shoulders of the animal will cause the headgate to close. If improperly adjusted the animal may be caught at the hips instead of the shoulders resulting in a potentially dangerous situation. The self-catching headgate should be easy to adjust. If adjustments are difficult to make, then a different brand may need to be evaluated. The mechanism used to hold the headgate closed should be protected so an animal cannot accidentally cause the headgate to open. Look at the bottom of the headgate to see if there is the potential for an animal to catch its feet when pushing back. The headgate should be constructed in a manner that will prevent an animal from putting its feet through an opening where the feet will have to be removed prior to opening.

The scissors type headgates vary in the size of the opening when releasing the animal. If a producer has large animals, then a headgate that opens fully would be advisable. As with the self-catching headgate, there should not be any openings where the animal's feet can be caught and must be removed before opening.

With both the self-catching and scissors type headgates the controls should be located where they can be operated with minimal effort. Also consider where the headgate and chute are going to be located on the farm. Will there be any obstructions that will make it difficult to operate the headgate? This could be from a low roof or placement too near a wall or fence.

Look at the bars on the headgate where the animal's neck will be held. Are the bars straight where the head can move up and down or curved to limit movement. Is it easy to make adjustments to the bars if needed? Is there a place to position a neck restraint device on the headgate?

Chute

The framework holding the sides of the chute should be attached to the headgate in a manner that will allow easy access to the neck area. If the chute does not allow easy access to give injections in the neck, it is advisable to look at different models. The bottom of the chute sides should be adjustable in width to accommodate different size animals. The adjustment mechanisms should be easy to operate and recessed so an individual will not trip over them while working cattle. Sides of the chute should have bars that can be dropped to allow access to the animals. Chutes differ with regard to bar systems and length. Determine if the bars are too high or too low to allow access to the animals that you will be working. Are the bars easy to raise up and let down? A drop-down panel should be on the bottom to allow access to the underside of animals. This panel should be strong enough to prevent bending but light enough to be easily opened and closed.

The chute should have at least one side that will open to release a downed animal. Be sure that site selected for placement of the chute will allow for the opening of one or both sides. Be sure that the floor of the chute has traction bars or other mechanism to prevent the animals from slipping.

The controls for the squeeze mechanism of the chute should be readily accessible. The controls should allow the squeezing process to take place without excessive effort. Also, the controls should allow for pressure to be easily removed. Is the side panel on the chute easy to open and close? Are the controls located so the risk of bumping into them is minimal?

Back Gate

The back gate on chutes come in a variety of forms. Some drop down behind animals while some close like a headgate or simply slide closed. A producer should select the type that he/she feels the most comfortable using. Also consider where the chute will be located. Will there be adequate room for the back gate to operate? This includes both overhead and side clearance. Are the controls for the back gate readily accessible? Are the controls easy to use without unnecessary effort?

Palpation Cage

Squeeze chutes can be purchased with or without a palpation cage. It is strongly recommended that a palpation cage be purchased. The palpation cage provides easy access to the rear of animals for such practices as castration, pregnancy checking and artificial insemination. The palpation cage should be large enough to provide easy access to the animal and have a door that will swing away from the chute and latch across the alley. This will provide protection from the next animal to come into the chute while working with the animal in the chute. Consider whether the palpation cage should have doors on both sides to provide easier access.

Scales

Scales are an important management tool in the beef operation. Some squeeze chutes can be purchased with scales integrated into the system. A decision must be made about the purchase of a combined unit. Having scales attached allows weighing each time an animal is caught. However, combined units also cause extra wear and tear on the scales as animals pass over them every time they are worked. Evaluate where the scales are to be incorporated into the system prior to purchase of the squeeze chute.

Additional Facility Components

A crowding alley and tub should also be considered as essential components for the handling facilities. These can be purchased or made from materials available on the farm. They need to be positioned to provide stress free movement of animals into the chute.

Summary

The purchase of a squeeze chute is a large investment for most beef producers. A careful evaluation of all components of the squeeze chute should be done before purchase. Make sure the correct decisions are made before the check is written since the purchased unit will be used for a long time before being replaced.