

THE COMFORT column

BY ALEX JENKINS



Why are you a dairy farmer? I would suggest that you are not in dairying to make milk, you are in it to make money. If you produce milk but lose money, you will not be a dairy farmer for long. Two aspects that can greatly affect the profitability of dairying are cow comfort and nutrition – and these two are inextricably intertwined. If cows are uncomfortable, they will not relax and make milk. They will still eat your money, in the shape of the feed you give them, but they will not pay you back with milk. Alternatively, if they do not eat a high-quality, well-balanced, well-mixed feed, they will still cost you money in feed, but might pay you back with problems instead of profits.

There are many ways to house and keep cows. Here are some quick tips applicable to four of the most common ones.

BEDDING PACKS

For a 650 kg cow, the target bedded area is 6,7 m² per cow with a target application of 12 kg of fresh bedding per cow per day. For aerobic bedding, the pack should be stirred at least twice a day, while for deep-litter bedding, the entire bed should be removed every four weeks. Water should be supplied well away from the bedding pack to prevent the bedding from becoming spoiled by splashed water. Poor drainage will increase bedding moisture levels and put cows at risk of infectious hoof diseases and/or mastitis.

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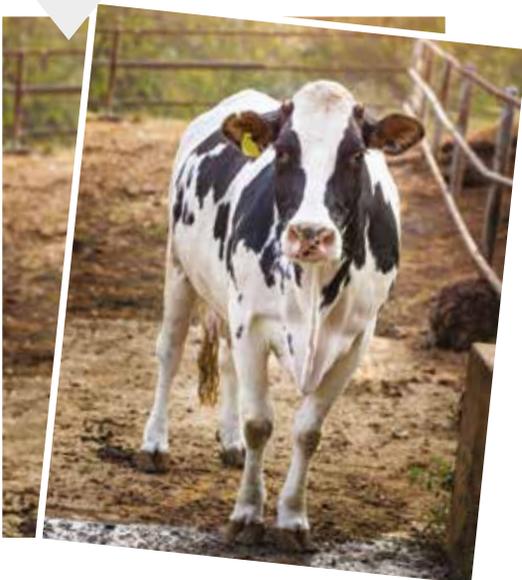
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FREE STALLS

The surface cushion is one of the most important aspects of the stall, and the amount of cushioning affects lying times, which will affect milk production. A bedding depth of under 20 cm may cause inadequate cushioning and decrease lying time. The surface should pass the knee-drop test and be soft and malleable from the front of the stall to the back. Excessive moisture on the lying surface may decrease lying time by up to an hour a day. It is also important to watch out for bob-zone obstructions and placement of brisket boards so that the stall is correctly used by the cow.

DRYLOTS

A drylot should be sized correctly for the average body weight of the cows it contains and there should be at least one feed space per cow. There should be a depth of at least 7,5 cm of loose dirt or dried manure in the lying area. Wet areas must be removed with every milking and replaced with dry bedding material.



FEED AUDITS

Whether the cows are on pasture or total mixed ration (TMR) systems, feed audits should be conducted by your nutritionist. Your nutritionist may be technically excellent, but he is not the one eating the diet. Learn to listen to your cows and react accordingly. Manure evaluations determine sorting, starch level, potential acidosis, and diet throughflow. Observing different patterns within a single pen should tell you that the cows are not eating the same diet. The percentage of cows lying down and ruminating tells you something about the effectiveness of the fibre in the diet.

Check the mixing consistency, fibre cut length, and sorting behaviour. If fibres are poorly processed, check your mixer blades and do not overmix your silage. No nutritional management program can model the speed at which feed dries out. If you are mixing the ideal dry matter, yet fail to notice that the feed dries out in an hour, the cows will not be getting the feed you expect, and you will not get the results you expect. On TMR systems, feed delivery and push-up are two aspects that are entirely within your control, so it is worth focusing your efforts and resources on them.

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CONCLUSION

As a dairy farmer, a dedicated focus on comfort and feeding will allow you to not only make milk, but make the money you need to have the good life that you deserve. [mpo](#)