

# CONTINUED FOCUS REAPS REWARDS

by Elizabeth Kuhn

The theme for this month's issue of *The Dairy Mail* is "Choice, chance, and change". These three words really fill one with a sense of hope and optimism. We can hope for new possibilities and the potential to change our trajectory and outcomes should we decide to do so. This month, I would like to direct your attention to cow comfort, an important part of animal welfare. Lameness, a major factor affecting cow comfort, is an age-old problem on dairy farms. It really has been around for a long time, so why are we still seeing lame cows, if we all know that lameness negatively affects milk production and reproductive performance?

Cow comfort should be a focus on-farm not only to ensure animal welfare, but also because of the direct effect it can have on cow health. Given that there is always likely to be a handful of ‘sick, lame, and lazy’ cows, we tend to lose focus on the factors that can cause lameness. More often than we would like to admit, loss of focus goes hand in hand with neglect on the part of the farmer.

Once we have regained our focus, how do we even begin to tackle lameness in the herd? I will lead with the most popular quote heard from scientists – “To measure is to know”. It is the most frequently used adage for a reason ... we simply cannot solve what we cannot define.

**STEP 1: LOCOMOTION SCORING**

This may be a tedious process, but clearly defining how big your lameness problem is, and how much it is costing you in lost milk production, can be a valuable decision-making tool. Consult the FirstStep® locomotion scoring chart (adapted from Sprecher *et al.*, 1997), as discussed in detail in the May 2018 issue of *The Dairy Mail*, to determine the incidence of lameness in your herd. Each lameness score is associated with increased milk loss, as shown in Table 1. Using these two resources, you can easily start putting real numbers to the cost of lameness.

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**Table 1** Milk loss associated with lameness scores (source: Tacoma *et al.*, 2005)

Locomotion score	Milk loss
1	-
2	1%
3	8%
4	11%
5	34%

**STEP 2: IDENTIFY BOTTLENECKS**

Bottlenecks are any management or environmental factors on-farm that reduce cow or farm productivity. Some common lameness bottlenecks are the following:

**Cow flow through the milking parlour**

Cow flow problems create opportunities for cows to hurt themselves. Are there places that cows need to be pushed through so that they can move along? The result is that workers tend to chase cows, increasing the risk of cows slipping in such areas. Evaluate how cow flow could be improved and what is causing this glitch in the system.

**Walkways**

The number one culprit causing lameness on walkways tends to be stones – the smaller the stone, the greater the damage it can cause to hooves. Good walkways can reduce the risk of non-infectious hoof lesions.

**The footbath and/or foot mat**

The use of a footbath is key in managing infectious lesions caused by bacteria. For any infectious lesion, the correct and effective use of a footbath protocol will reduce the incidence of foot rot or digital dermatitis in the herd. Consult a leg hygiene scoring chart to determine how frequently you should be using your footbath.

A foot mat should only be used for non-infectious lesions as part of a strategy to improve sole hardness of the hoof, where hoof horn is being worn away faster than it can be replaced. Consult your local dairy hoof trimmer on the correct and proper use of a foot mat and footbath.

**STEP 3: PLAN OF ACTION**


Make use of the experts around you to help put an effective lameness management and prevention plan in place. Identifying lameness bottlenecks is only the second step in controlling lameness in the herd. Nutritional strategies can also play a role in improving hoof health and integrity, but should never be the only solution. Consult your nutritionist or consultant if hoof health is something you want to

address through your feeding strategy as part of a holistic approach to lameness.

### FOCUS ON COW COMFORT

We choose to focus on certain areas to drive improvement in our herd and farm. Focus on your biggest problems, but do not lose sight of the work you have already done. Maintaining a system that is set up to improve cow comfort is easier than starting

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from scratch. Choose to implement changes that will last if you want to change your herd and farm for the better. 



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