

Texas Dairy Matters

Higher Education Supporting the Industry

MANAGE PEN MOVES

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Every dairy manages cows in groups. At the very least there are dry cows and lactating cows. On many dairies, both far-off and close-up dry cow groups exist. Cows move from a calving pen to a fresh pen and finally to the lactating group; which may be further subdivided either by stage of lactation or breeding status.

Although these groups facilitate management of the cows, the number of pen changes a cow goes through can be stressful. Avoiding unnecessary pen moves and managing necessary moves reduces the social, environmental, and metabolic stress associated with changing pens.

Follow these guidelines to decrease the impact of pen changes:

- Only move cows once a week, if possible.
- Move cows in groups of ten or more animals.
- Avoid pen moves in the last two weeks before calving. With the variation in gestation length, this means relocating cows to the close-up pen three weeks prior to expected calving.
- Identify cows that carry twins or experience heat stress, as their gestation length typically is shorter. Plan to move these “short gestation” candidates four weeks prior to expected calving.



- Investigate alternatives to calving pens, such as dry lots with shades and bedded packs. Pay particular attention to keeping clean, dry areas for cows to calve. Consider repercussions on management practices to control diseases such as Johne's.
- Walk through the close-up cows on an hourly basis. Move cows to maternity pens only once the calf's feet show to minimize the risk of stillbirth.
- Design facilities so a single worker can move animals.
- Train workers to move cows quietly by using their flight zone as an aid.

Other ways to reduce the stress of pen moves include:

- Segregate heifers and older cows.
- Train heifers to lock-ups prior to entering the close-up pens.
- Install headlocks instead of post-and-rail. Canadian researchers have shown that aggressive behavior decreases and fewer cows are displaced when headlocks are used.
- Do not overstock, particularly in dry cow pens. Overstocking results in decreased feeding time and subordinate animals are again displaced more frequently.
- Conduct a heat stress audit and install additional cooling systems, if needed, to mitigate the impacts of heat stress.
- Minimize the amount of time cows are away from feed and water during pen moves.
- Restrict lock-ups to less than one hour per day even on the day cows are moved.

Advance planning for pen moves includes taking into account the activities in both the pen where the cow was prior to and after the move. A successful pen move minimizes the stress on the cow so productivity is maintained, or at least regained quickly.