

Texas Dairy Matters

Higher Education Supporting the Industry

ENSURING COW COMFORT

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The growth of the dairy industry in the Southwest region of the US has been remarkable. Large dairy operations adopted several housing styles for their animals and equipped the facilities with new production-enhancing technologies to optimize production of high quality milk.

For economic and animal care reasons, the dairy industry incorporated housing and management practices that reduce environmental risks while improving cattle health and comfort. The new systems accommodate normal cow behavior, enhance animal well-being, and result in fewer sick cows that require treatment. Improved consumer confidence and dairy product image results.

Animal scientists and dairy farmers continually explore different ways to improve the comfort of dairy cows. Cows must be doing one of three things:



1. Milking,
2. Eating/drinking, or
3. Resting.

In order to promote cow comfort, follow these practices:

Housing

- Provide cows free access to feed and clean water 24 hours a day – Modern dairy design allows cows to eat, drink and rest whenever and wherever they choose.
- Equip barns/freestalls with fans and cooling systems to minimize heat stress.
- Ensure skid-resistant floors to reduce injuries; increase mobility to feed, water and resting areas; and accommodate estrous activity.

- Adjust the freestall dimensions to the animal size and create a comfortable bed, preferably of sand.

To evaluate stall design for cow comfort, ask these questions:

1. Do cows appear comfortable and content when standing or lying in stalls?
2. Do cows lie backward in stalls or in alleys?
3. Do cows stand half-in or half-out of stalls?
4. Do cows stand in stalls in an angular fashion?
5. Are all stalls used equally?
6. When cows normally rest, are more than 20 to 30 % standing in the stalls?
7. Are cow udders dirty?

Answering questions 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 with a “yes” or questions 1 and 5 with a “no” identifies areas that need improvement.

Ventilation

- Design ventilation systems to prevent high humidity in winter and heat build-up in summer. Provide air flow across all cows.

Poorly ventilated barns have an ammonia odor. Cows may be coughing, have nasal discharge, or moisture on their hair coat.



Feeding

- Design diets to provide all the nutrients required for the cow’s stage of lactation and reproductive status.
- Provide feed at least 20 hours a day.
- Push-ups feed frequently during the day.
- Clean feed bunks at least once a day and discard refusals.

Animal Handling

- Move cows slowly at their speed and minimize stress.
- Move cows in groups of no less than ten to minimize stress and animal interactions.
- When required, transport or restrain animals carefully to reduce stress.

Animal Health

- Provide cows regular veterinary care including: periodic check-ups, preventative vaccinations and prompt treatment of illness.

- Treat sick cows appropriately. Separate cows from the milking herd until after prescribed withdrawal times.
- Score cows on locomotion. Identify and treat lame cows promptly as prescribed by the herd veterinarian.
- Record body condition score several times during lactation. Identify thin or fat cows and handle them accordingly.

Milking Parlor and Holding Pen

- Plan milking to keep cows no more than an hour in the holding area. Check to see if cows are ruminating, a sign they are comfortable and content.
- Develop milking routine to minimize stress and fear. Loud noise startles cows, causing erratic behavior.
- Apply pre- and post-dip solutions before and after milking.
- Minimize time in the holding pen, one of the most stressful places in a dairy. Prevent overcrowding; and reduce time standing on concrete without feed and water, as much as possible.



Milk Quality and Mastitis Prevention

- Keep the parlor clean.
- Follow set procedures to thoroughly clean milking equipment before and after each use.
- Evaluate cow for mastitis. If disease is present, move cows to the hospital pen and treat appropriately.

Following the procedures outlined previously can improve cow comfort and well-being, which usually results in increased productivity and profitability as well.

<http://texasdairymatters.org>

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