

Not All Mattresses Are Equal

Several producers have commented recently that they would love to purchase new mattresses as soon as milk prices go up a bit, and they have been asking which ones they should look at. This is a good opportunity to highlight how not all mattresses are created equal.

The goal of the stall base is to provide the cow a comfortable place to rest and stand, while keeping her clean, and providing traction so she can transition from standing to resting and back up easily. Ultimately, we are trying to mimic the environment she would have out on pasture, where she can lay and stand on a somewhat soft grass surface. These goals can all be achieved with either deep-beds or mattresses, assuming the stalls are adequately sized and designed, and the stalls and bedding are properly managed.

One of the most important things to remember is that regardless of the type of stall base you have (deep-bed, mattress, waterbed, etc...) you still need a good amount of clean, dry bedding to ensure the stall is comfortable for the cow. Looking at mattresses specifically, studies have found higher lameness and injury prevalence when there is less than 1 inch of bedding covering the entire stall. Bedding can be expensive, but with one case of lameness costing anywhere from \$90-\$500, it is worth the investment. In order to keep 1 inch of bedding on a mattress, you most likely need to bed the stalls at least a few times/week. Further, remember to give your cows enough access to the stalls. You won't get the full return on your investment in new mattresses if the stall stocking density is too high or the time cows spend out of the pen for milking or in lock-up is greater than 3-3.5 hours/day (less for sick, fresh, and lame cows), as the cows won't be able to fully utilize the stalls as they need.

When budgeting for new mattresses or looking at your existing ones, keep in mind the actual lifetime of those mattresses. It's probably shorter than you'd like. Although some retailers claim mattresses can last up to 15 years, most of the mattresses that I've seen that are over 10 years old are no longer doing their job and providing a comfortable place for the cow to lay down.

Thankfully, there have been some significant improvements in mattress design over the last few years, with companies coming out with lots of different options; however, this also means there are huge differences in price, from \$125-\$350+ per stall. When picking out which type of mattress consider how comfortable the mattress feels while new, the cost, the warranty and service provided by the retailer, installation, and if possible, visit a farm that has those mattresses so you can see how they are wearing over time. Look for mattresses that are thicker and have multiple layers to increase the amount of cushion provided to the cow (so not just a rubber mat). This can come in the form of a gel mattress, foam mattress with one thick (several inches) layer or multiple layers, or a waterbed with a foam mattress underneath, and make sure whatever you pick has a good covering that provides traction but isn't too abrasive.

If you have more questions, contact Dairy Specialist Lindsay Ferlito (lc636@cornell.edu; 607-592-0290).