

## **Improved Cow Comfort Linked to Productivity and Profitability**

By: Lindsay Ferlito

You've all heard it before, "happy cows make more milk". Whether you agree with the wording or not, you probably agree with the message; cows that are more comfortable and are free from disease, stress, and injury will make more milk. This is not a new concept, but researchers continue to focus on it to try to better understand what you as a farmer can do on your farm to improve cow comfort and how that can impact productivity and your bottom line.

A group of researchers from across Canada have recently published (in the Journal of Dairy Science) data from projects involving 130 freestall farms (Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec) and 100 tiestall farms (Ontario and Quebec). The goal was to identify associations between on-farm measures of cow comfort, productivity, and profitability. Farms were visited at least once and data was collecting for animal-based measures (ie: BCS, lameness, injuries, lying behavior, etc...), management factors (ie: stall cleanliness, stocking density, age at first calving, culling rate, etc...), and profitability measures (ie: margin per cow, margin per kilogram of fat quota, etc...).

On the freestall dairies, the main findings include:

- Higher corrected milk production was associated with fewer cows with knee injuries and dirty flanks, and fewer lame cows.
- Higher margin per cow (calculated over replacement costs) was associated with more stalls having dry bedding, fewer cows with knee injuries, and a lower standard deviation in average lying time

On the tiestall dairies, the main findings include:

- Higher corrected milk production was associated with higher average lying time and more cows fitting the tie-rail height.
- Higher margin per cow (calculated over replacement costs) was associated with higher average lying time, cleaner stalls, and increased hoof trimming frequency (more than once per year).

Overall, a lot of the factors were related back to stall design and management. Having properly sized stalls that are kept clean and well-bedded will help reduce injuries and lameness and increase lying time, which leads to increased cow comfort, production, and profitability.

Given the extended low milk prices, a lot of dairies have stated that they can't afford to make any big changes, but what is promising is that the changes don't have to be big and costly for you to notice a benefit. North Country research projects have provided great examples of local dairies that have made changes that have resulted in improved cow comfort, including increasing the amount of bedding used, adding more fans and sprinklers to improve lying time, retrofitting stalls to provide more useable space for larger cows, and learning how to identify lame cows earlier to reduce the prevalence and severity of cases. For more information on how to improve cow comfort or have an assessment done on your farm, contact your Regional Dairy Specialist, Lindsay Ferlito, at 607-592-0290 or lc636@cornell.edu.



(pictures by Lindsay Ferlito)