

A Three-Prong Formula for Success: Clean, Dry and Comfortable

By Charles E. Gardner, DVM

The late Doctor Jim Jarret was a mentor to me during my early years in practice. It was from him that I first heard the phrase, “clean, dry, and comfortable” to describe how every animal on a dairy farm should be treated. There are three important reasons for dairy producers to make this happen on their farms.

The first of these reasons is public perception. Last week while driving, I noticed a group of heifers standing knee deep in mud. They looked dirty and cold. I wondered how many other people traveling that road also noticed, and in turn formed a negative opinion of how dairy animals are kept. Would that opinion lessen their tendency to drink milk or consume other dairy products? Would it also increase their tendency to support radical animal rights organizations?

The second reason to keep animals clean, dry, and comfortable is economics. You will experience far less disease and far better performance if those three words accurately describe your calves, heifers, dry cows, and lactating herd. All of those groups are important. Keep in mind that a single episode of pneumonia or diarrhea in a calf can have a permanent and negative impact on milk production as an adult. Dry cows who live under stressful conditions have more disease, lower production, and are more likely to be culled than those that are not stressed.

The third reason to provide a good environment for all animals is that it is simply the right thing to do. Your livestock are dependent on you to provide a good environment. None of them should be subjected to damp, dirty, or uncomfortable conditions.

During the 1990s, I practiced in Berks and Lebanon counties. Two major changes occurred in that area during that time. One was tunnel ventilation, and the other was mattresses. The impact on health and performance was dramatic. In the 20 years since then, a lot more progress has been made. When I look at DHIA reports now, I am amazed at the extremely low somatic cell counts, excellent reproduction, and very high component production that some herds attain. When I visit these farms, I see that animal comfort is a high priority.

How are things on your farm? Take time this week to slowly walk by all of your calves, heifers, dry cows, and the milking herd. Do the terms “clean, dry, and comfortable” apply to all of them? In the calf barn, get down on your knees to see what it is like from the calf’s point view. Would you be at ease if a group of consumers were with you? While you are doing this, also take a look at any safety concerns for you or your employees. What changes should be made?

There are many aspects of managing a successful dairy farm. One of the most important is providing a good environment for every animal. Doing so provides a direct benefit to your checkbook and an indirect benefit through better public perception of the dairy industry. You will probably find yourself a little more proud of your operation as well.