

Be Careful with Overcrowding

By Charles E. Gardner, DVM

One of the dilemmas that many dairy managers must consider is how many animals can be put into a given facility. Many operations have found that expansion can be done by overcrowding their lactating barns until new facilities can be built. That way, they have animals available to begin filling the new building. What is the problem with this plan?

One problem is that calf, heifer, and dry cow facilities are not constructed along with the lactating ones. As more milking cows are added, the number of youngstock and dry cows eventually rises, and these buildings become overcrowded. Inevitably, the health of these animals is affected. Because their illnesses might not have an immediate effect on milk production, there is less incentive to address new facilities for calves, heifers, and dry cows.

While this is often the reality on many dairy farms, we must be aware that eventually the results of overcrowding non-lactating animals will impact production and profit. Research has shown that calves that suffer from even one bout of pneumonia produce less milk. For dry cows, stress often sets them up for illness after calving.

The most important group of non-lactating animals are close-up dry cows. These animals should never be over-crowded. If on a bedded pack, allow at least 100 square feet per animal, along with at least 30 inches of bunk space. If they are in free stalls, be sure there is a stall for every cow.

The space you need for calves and heifers increases with age. The following chart applies to bedded packs. If free stalls are used, they should be sized appropriately. Enough bunk space should be available for all animals to eat at once.

Age in Months	Square Feet of Pack per Animal
Zero - 2	30
2 - 4	30
4 - 8	40
8 - 12	50
12 - 16	60
16 - 20	70
20 - 1 month pre calving	80
Pre Fresh	120

Besides having enough resting space and bunk space, ventilation is very important. Natural ventilation can be fine if there are open sidewalls that are not blocked by other buildings. Mechanical ventilation and fans are often needed in many situations. Remember, your goal is to have all animals clean, dry, and comfortable.

As you observe your calves and heifers daily, they should be bright and alert, with shiny haircoats. They should be free of coughing and nasal discharge. Coughing calves are not healthy, and they will likely be hampered by reduced lung function when they become adults.

If you are not able to provide adequate housing for all of your youngstock, consider raising only the number of animals that match your facilities. Send extra ones to a commercial calf raiser, or purchase adult animals as needed. If you choose either of these options, talk with your veterinarian about biosecurity. Bringing animals into your herd has some risk, but it can be managed.