

## Animal Care and Comfort

### Situation Overview:

A. *Can you determine if cow comfort or care was limiting the productivity or profitability of your dairy operation? Yes. If yes, please list animal factor(s) that needed to be improved.*

- Ventilation
- Weather impacts on cattle
- Lighting
- Stall size

In our old barn, cow comfort was an issue. We struggled during the winter because we couldn't let cows outside for exercise. We had mattresses and sand bedding in tie stalls, but invariably, we would lose a cow because she was lame. In the spring and through the fall, things were better for the cows because they were on pasture, but pasture wasn't a source of feed. The time away from the feed bunk hurt intakes, depressed production, and ultimately affected our profitability.

It also was a very labor intensive barn, requiring us to push up feed and lay down bedding for each cow. We were so busy performing daily labor in the tie stalls that we weren't worried about smaller details such as bunk space that could help our operation. Our ventilation system was nature and exhaust fans.

We decided to expand our operation and make cow comfort a priority. It was a difficult transition from tie stall to free stall by doubling the herd. We had to rotate cows, with half inside and half outside, until the new barn construction was complete. There were times when we questioned ourselves on the road to expansion because it was hard on the cows. We also rented another barn for eight months during this project, and it seemed to have more issues than our barn.

B. *If you determined that cow comfort or care was a limiting factor, did you make structural and/or management changes to address the deficiencies? Yes. Please list structural and/or management changes. We built our new barn with cow comfort in mind.*

- Ventilation – In the new barn, we have an automatic curtain system and doors at each end. Fifty six inch overhead mounted fans, located in the free stall and in the holding pens, also improved ventilation for cow comfort.
- Automatic Scrapers – Area is clean for the cows, with the help of a skid loader. Previously, manure was removed through a gutter system.
- Management – We no longer do all the manual labor on the farm, giving us more time to manage the cows, business, and employees. One day a week, we have “Herd Health Day.” We schedule hoof trimming on a regular basis. Vaccinations previously were only in the spring and fall. Today, vaccinations are 25 days after cows freshen, before they go into the breeding program.

The new barn has plenty of lighting and every stall has mattresses. We use sawdust for bedding because of the ample supply and vendors willing to deliver by tractor trailer. We have adequate stall size and a hoof bath as cows flow to the parlor.



## Animal Care and Comfort...continued

C. *What did you learn that would be of interest to the broader dairy community?* We continue to learn as we go, but we know management is important. There were finer points on our dairy that we were missing. With our new facility, we can spend time on details that will make us more profitable in the future.

The new barn is built on a hill and we thought that we would have plenty of natural ventilation, never thinking we would need fans. By June, when the temperature soared, it became obvious that fans were needed, despite the curtains and natural ventilation.

We grooved our walkways, but less than a year into the new barn, they were wearing down, and we needed to add mats. Even though it's a new barn, we must continue managing, paying attention to what our cows need to remain comfortable.

D. *What is your farm's approach to administration and documentation around the use of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for animal care?* Prior to building the barn, we had verbal SOPs. At that time, we didn't think it was that important. When we had five – six calves, written SOPs were not an issue; I took care of all the calves.

Last summer, our Penn State extension educator helped us by printing off standard templates that we customized to our farm. Today, they are in a binder, with pictures of our processes, in English and Spanish. New employees receive a binder and for example, watch a few milkings, with the binder in hand. We changed our policy and procedures on calves. In the fall, we had trouble with our calves. We went back and compared what each employee was doing with the calves and changed the process. Today, we are working on finishing up the SOPs for our dry cows. Our SOPs are living documents, always changing as we learn new ways to improve our animal care.

White boards also have been a practical, inexpensive way for us to communicate between owners and employees. We have white boards all over the barn – parlor, calf feeding area and dry cow barn. If cows get moved, we write it on the board. Stacey takes a picture of the board, once a week, with her cell phone and transposes it to the PC Dart software program. Once she takes the picture, she erases the board. If Stacey has a sick calf, she marks it in red marker on the board, so the next employee that feeds sees the notes. It is an ongoing dialogue on the white board between employees. We have miles to go, with lots of learning, but we've made great progress during this project.

E. *Have you enrolled in a formal animal care program? If so, what have you learned that's been beneficial to your operation?* We are enrolled in the Dairy Farmers of American (DFA) animal care program. They visit our farm and perform an audit every year, issuing a certificate. For us, audits have been a great tool to remind us what the public is thinking, when they drive by or visit our farm. While we always have been proud of how we take care of our cows, we have so much to do during the day that we sometimes forget about the public relations side of our business. It's the little things and the big things – how are calves look, where we store our medicine, any manure on the heifers out in the pasture, etc. – that matter to our neighbors and customers.