

Keep Your Cows Comfortable

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Keeping dairy cows comfortable so they will be able to produce more is an issue being given increased attention by many producers and industry support professionals. Various factors which cows are exposed to, such as how they are handled, housed, milked, their diet, etc., all affect how stressed the cows are, and in turn have an impact on their milk producing ability and the quality of milk produced.

Dr. Rick Grant from the Miner Agricultural Research Institute in Chazy, New York states that cows need 12-14 hours of lying/resting time each day to produce to their potential, have fewer feet and leg problems, and overall have improved general health. However, with the various activities a cow performs each day (eating, grooming, standing or moving in alleys, time in holding pen and milking parlor, interaction with other cows, estrus activity, etc.), many cows do not have the required 12-14 hours of resting time available to them. And then, if cow comfort factors reduce the daily amount of resting time, many cows have even fewer hours of lying time each day.

One of the facility factors that affects cow comfort is the free stalls that cows lie in to rest. Considerable research in recent years has looked at the impact on cow comfort and stall use caused by the size of the stalls (width and length), the kind of bedding surface and bedding material used in the stalls, the depth of the bedding material, the style of partitions between the stalls, the openness of the front of the stalls, the effects of neck rails and brisket boards, the effect of the height of the curb at the back of the stalls, etc. A recently published article in the July 2006 issue of the Journal of Dairy Science reported on the impact of wooden brisket boards in free stalls on cow usage of the stalls.

Researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada gave dry/pregnant cows (n= 15) the choice of lying in stalls with or without brisket boards. They found that cows preferred lying in stalls without brisket boards (68% of the time), and spent an average of 1.2 hours more per day lying in the stalls without brisket boards (12.8 versus 11.6 hours per day). The additional time resulted from cows lying in the stalls longer when they were in them, rather than from more visits per day. Thus, one could probably conclude that the cows were more comfortable when they were lying down in the stalls without brisket boards. The researchers noted that while all the cows preferred the stalls without brisket boards, the longer cows were able to move farther forward in the stalls without the brisket boards, and definitely preferred them. The researchers also stated that additional research was needed before producers quit using brisket boards.

While the cows in this study were apparently more comfortable in stalls without brisket boards, I would raise the concern about cows defecating more often in the backs of those stalls. If the stalls without brisket boards were dirtier, then I would expect the udders of those cows to be dirtier. While that is a concern for dry cows, it would definitely be a daily concern for lactating cows. Udder health and milk quality are certainly impacted by udder cleanliness.

Rather than remove existing briskets boards from free stalls based on just this study, I suggest that producers look at other factors associated with the free stalls that effect cow usage (as mentioned above). Improving those factors could well increase daily stall usage time. Also look at the other activities that cause the cows to be away from the stalls each day, as mentioned above. Perhaps changes can be made to allow the cows more lying time daily so their performance and health can be improved, or at least not affected by reduced lying/resting time. Asking a competent advisor to review your facilities and practices, and then offer suggestions of changes you as a producer can make to improve cow comfort may be time and effort well spent, and result in more milk and profit.