



From the desk of Dr. Lauren Lauwers, DVM

April 1, 2020

In January I was able to attend the American Association of Bovine Practitioner's Recent Grad Conference in Columbus, OH. There, I learned from some of the industry's leading experts in today's world of modern agriculture. I tried to step out of my comfort zone and take the time to really reflect on some of the discussion topics that are, what I consider, areas in the cattle raising industry I am not very familiar. I have decided to challenge myself to learn more about dairy cow nutrition.

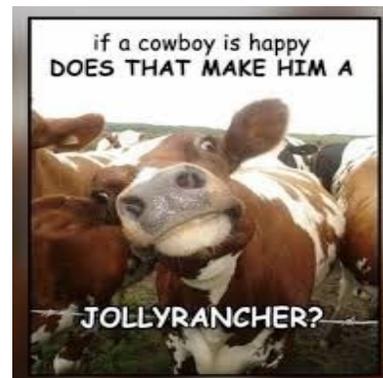
Dr. Gary Oetzel, from the College of Veterinary Medicine at University of Wisconsin, discussed bunk space as an area of opportunity that can be easily overlooked. Holstein dairy cows are about 30 inches wide, so the ideal bunk space for a pen of cows should accommodate at least 30 inches per cow in the pen, to allow for *all* cows to eat at the same time. When there is not enough bunk space for cows to eat when they want, cows will eat larger and fewer meals per day. Research has shown cows that eat larger and fewer meals have a greater risk for ruminal acidosis and it promotes excessive TMR sorting. Both of these conditions favor lower butter fat yield, and may exacerbate excessive weight gain. With this in mind, it's hard to ignore the fact that housing and bunk space tends to be expensive in colder climates. I remember my first time seeing the barns for dairies out west, no walls, just high ceilings to create shade! In the region of the world we live in, those types of buildings are not ideal shelters for our cattle. It is understandable if your milking herd outgrows your facilities and re-modeling or building a whole new infrastructure may not be financially feasible. While the appropriate amount of bunk space is the gold standard recommendation, there are some management practices to help reduce the impact of limited bunk space which include: feeding two times a day with multiple push-ups, minimize TMR sorting, and feeding for a higher amount of refusals (around 2-5%).

In heavy periods of calving, pre-fresh overstocking can be difficult to avoid. It's not recommended to move cows into the pre-fresh closer to calving to reduce overstocking, because this will limit the time those cows have in the pre-fresh pen if they were to calve early (example: twins). Shortened time in the pre-fresh pen can lead to higher risk for metabolic issues during the transition period. One way to avoid overstocked pen issues in pre-fresh pens is to design the pen to have expandable access to bunk space with a movable gate.

Maybe a flexible pen space that is shared with late lactation cows would be an option? When it comes to the fresh pen, flexibility is limited. Fresh cows need to have a minimum of 10 days in the fresh pen. The best tactic for avoiding fresh pen overstocking is to move your healthy cows as soon as possible and avoid moving cows out earlier than 10 days. A lot of what I'm learning tends to boil down to achieving cow comfort; as Dr. Mark Fox says "Lots of bunk space and lots of deep beds make for healthy happy fresh cows".

With the current pandemic and as a medical professional, I feel the need to comment on the situation. I believe we are very lucky and blessed to work every day in agriculture and since the spread of COVID-19, I am even more grateful to the industry I am proud to work in. While many individuals have had their place of employment shut down or sent to "work from home", agricultural workers have continued their day to day duties. Thank you to our crop growers and animal husbandry providers; it is because of you the grocery stores will not run out of food. I am also thankful for the human health care providers who are on the frontline of this virus. Although I am not considered "high risk" for a severe viral infection, I am limiting my interactions with the public in order to prevent spreading of the disease. I am not panicked by the pandemic, but what does worry me is the availability of hospital care for those individuals who are considered high risk. I will encourage and challenge you to practice the biosecurity we all are well trained in when it comes to care-taking for our livestock. Just like separating newborn calves, we must social distance from one another to assist our healthcare providers in fighting this pandemic.

We hope you all have a great spring! Stay safe during these difficult times; we will get through this!



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