

NAVAN VETERINARY SERVICES NOVEMBER 2013 NEWSLETTER

A recent article in “Northeast Dairy Business” by Bill Stone (a reprint from 2006) did a great job in summarizing several areas of cow comfort on a dairy and how we may want to evaluate how well we are doing.

Comfortable cows are healthier (fewer cases of lameness, fewer injuries) and have higher production. The days of short narrow cement stalls and low neck rails are long behind us. Many researchers in animal behavior have been able to attach dollar values to the improvements in essential cow behaviors such as lying time, time and space at manger and ruminating times for example.

In Bill Stone’s article, we are reminded that cows have a time budget to do their things such as eating, drinking, ruminating, resting and socializing. We interrupt their day to milk them, clean stalls, trim feet, and do regular vet work.

In any 24 hour period, we are left with approximately 3.5 hours to perform our “interruptions” before we begin to affect the cow’s behavior, according to research by Rick Grant at the Miner Institute in Chazy, New York.

One behavior that cows will prioritize over all others is resting/lying time. The average Holstein cow (across all lactations, parities and stages of pregnancy) according to Bewley et al, 2010, will rest for approximately 12 hours per day. Higher producing cows as a subset will rest >14 hrs/day. There are many ways that a dairy can interfere with a cows need and desire to lie down and rest. These include things like headlocks, too long in holding areas for milking, poorly designed and poorly bedded stalls, or overcrowding to name a few. The cost of short-changing a cows “down time” by 1 hr/day is 0.9 – 1.3 kg of milk. Cows will shorten their time at the manger (↓DMI) or water trough to catch up on lost down time.

Check how many cows as a percent are lying down 1-2 hrs after milking. This is the “cow comfort index” and should be at least 85%. If cows are standing too long, there will be higher incidences of lameness in your dairy.

Cows will ruminate approximately 8 hrs/day, as this usually occurs when they are resting. Stressed cows will not ruminate. Stresses from loud noises in the barn, rough handling or excess competition between herd mates can all result in lower rumination times. Rumination is critical for a healthy rumen, as saliva helps to buffer the acids produced from feed fermentation. Rumen acidosis is associated with decreased milk production (due to erratic feed intakes), impaired cow health and higher rates of involuntary culls.

It has been suggested in Bill Stones article that 50-60% of cows should be ruminating at any one time on average throughout the day. Obviously there are quiet times in the barn where that number will be higher and high activity times when that number will be lower. But, on average, 50-60% is the goal. If you don't see this on your dairy, try to find the problem.

- is the cows budgeted rest time interrupted too often?
- are stalls dimensions not consistent with what we know about their needs?
- are the stall surfaces in need of bedding or repair?
- is there an overcrowding issue?

Ensuring cow comfort will be mandated upon us by the dairy industry, but it is also a smart move economically. Fewer lame cows, fewer involuntary culls, better milk production and reproductive performance can all be expected if you ensure the cows are clean, dry and comfortable.

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