

# Northeast producers improve cow comfort

But they have more to do if they want the cow comfort level in their facilities to measure up to that found on Western dairies

By *Eleanor Jacobs*

**Brian Perkins, technical service** specialist with Monsanto Dairy Business, operated his own dairy nutrition business in Vermont for several years before joining Monsanto. He then worked with dairy herds in Idaho for a year before returning to the Northeast. Perkins now consults on dairies in New York, Michigan and Indiana.

His exposure to herds across the country gives Perkins insights on the strengths and shortcomings of Northeast dairies in the area of cow comfort. PRO-DAIRY asked Perkins about those.

“We’ve allowed the term animal welfare to become a dirty word,” he says. “But animal welfare is what it’s all about.”

**PRO-DAIRY:** What characterizes managers who ensure great cow comfort?

**Brian Perkins:** It’s a love of cows and a strong desire to have a professional dairy operation. They design barns and systems with cows in mind.

**PD:** When comparing Northeast herds to West Coast ones, how do they differ in areas related to cow comfort?

**Perkins:** The difference centers on two huge issues: what cows lie on and overall barn design. In the Northeast, we rely on concrete stalls and mattresses. The West relies on sand or dried manure solids. In the Northeast, it’s six-row freestall barns that are overcrowded, compared to the West’s four-row barns with no overcrowding.

In the Northeast, our goal has been to minimize cost. When all you do is look at cost, you can build a six-row barn cheaper per stall. Maybe we need to look at how to maximize profit.

That said, I’ve seen a shift in the last two years in the minds of Northeast dairy producers about housing cows and providing for cow comfort.

**PD:** Given the Northeast’s typical barn design and stall surface, what can producers here do to improve cow comfort?

**Perkins:** With a lot of diligence, they can create comfortable cows:

- Producers should use as much bedding as possible on mattresses.

- Keep overcrowding to a minimum, based on stage of lactation. Dry cows should be zero overcrowded, close-up and fresh cows housed at 80 to 100% occupancy. After 100 days, you can do whatever you want based on your limit for laminitis and environmental mastitis.

- In six-row barns, it’s protocol and an employee system. Since you can’t line all the cows up at the feed bunk in a six-row barn to observe them, you must have protocols in place for monitoring cows. Then make it possible for employees to carry them out.

- Build freestall barns with 14-foot side-walls, and don’t skimp on barn width.

- It’s tempting to limit the number of crossovers since with each one you lose six stalls. But don’t do it. In a six-row barn, you need a 12-foot crossover every 80 to 100 feet. In a four-row barn, you need one every 100 to 120 feet.

- Pay attention to concrete. I see new construction or additions with horrible concrete quality. That can kill cows, so hire a contractor who knows how to do concrete.

**PD:** Short of building new housing to meet a “Western” standard, what can Northeast producers do to improve cow comfort without spending a lot of money?

**Perkins:** Look at how freestall loops are mounted. It’s easy to change and important as a way to help cows lie down and get up. I suggest producers take out channel iron and put in a post to mount loops on. Loops should be 48 inches above where cows plant their front feet.

**PD:** What’s the cow comfort index and how can producers use it?

**Perkins:** Look at cow behavior in freestall barns. They come out of the parlor, eat a big meal, take a big drink and lie down. To assess how comfortable your facilities are, see how many cows are lying in stalls one to two hours after a pen is milked. You want to see a minimum of 90% of the stalls occupied. ■



“Animal welfare is what it’s all about,” says Brian Perkins.

**The barn you build tomorrow will house cows 20 years from now. Build it to support production 20 years from now.**

## FYI

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■ To learn more about comfortable cow facilities, see the PRO-DAIRY facilities website: [www.prodairyfacilities.cornell.edu](http://www.prodairyfacilities.cornell.edu)