



Dairy Pipeline

Department of Dairy Science

Volume 42, No. 2

March 2021

www.vtdairy.dasc.vt.edu

Your Greatest Resource - People

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One of the concerns I hear most from producers regards the lack of available workers for dairy farms. Why would someone want to work on a farm when they can have another job with less responsibilities and more benefits? How do you make your farm a place where people want to work?

While it may be true, that there are fewer potential people to work on farms, there are still many people who could do these jobs. So how to find and keep good employees?

- Cash is King! You may have heard this statement when talking about farm finances. While salary isn't everything, it certainly is very important for attracting and keeping good employees. If you are paying less than a "town" job, the grass will always look greener on the other side for employees.
- What benefits can you provide? The importance of different benefits vary depending on the age of the employee. Find out what your employees want, both short term and long term. Don't be afraid to give an annual statement of the value of these benefits to them, but don't discount the value to you as the farm owner, as well.
- Where can you find these workers? This is difficult. There are many job application websites such as Indeed, Facebook and others. Most university ag departments have a listserv of students and alumni.
- Internships, are a great way to find potential employees and give youth some real-world experience. Students are looking for paid summer internships and this is like a trial period to see if the situation would work with no long-term commitments.
- Have a vision for your farm and for the position. Good employees want to be a part of something larger, worthwhile and well...good. What is important to your farm, where will the business be in five years? Make sure all the employees know what your farm goals are. This can change over time, but shouldn't change daily. Everyone on the farm should work towards the farm goals.
- Communication is key to both farm and employee success. An employee should know who their boss is. Who do they report to? It should be one person, not four different people telling them four different things.
- Have a written job description. This is important when hiring people, they need to know up front what the expectations are. Again, this is something that can change over time, but not on a daily basis.
- In the business world we refer to professional development. This is important for farm employees, too. Make it a part of their job to develop skills. This development should be tailored to each person's needs and what they want. The calf feeder and the

milker should have different trainings. Sit down annually and discuss what their needs will be for the coming year.

- Family employees should be held to the same standards as other employees. This is very difficult on many farms, but communication is key to success. Keeping the family relationship separate from the work relationship is critical.
- Offer rewards when things are going well and when they are not. Sometimes this can be hard to do when everything seems to be going wrong. It doesn't need to be something expensive. It could be a simple extra half day off, or maybe buying them lunch after a long morning. There are many things that you can do to make employees feel like you appreciate their work. Offer regular pay raises or bonuses, even when you don't think the farm can handle it. It is far easier to give someone a small raise than it is to find a new employee.

There are employees out there who want to work on farms. In 2021, be creative with your recruiting and retention of employees, support their mental health and find out what is important to them. Let them know what is important to you. Find employees that fit your farm business. Use their strengths and train them where they need training. You will need to be competitive with other local jobs in both salary and benefits. If you have a high turnover rate, find out what the problem is. Good employees will stay in good jobs!

Enter Sandman—Do stall or bedding type influence secondary measures of cow comfort

Authored by A.C. Hruby and J.M. Prestegard, both Ph.D. Students with Dr. Mark Hanigan, Department of Dairy Science, Virginia Tech; mhanigan@vt.edu

For high-performing dairy operations, the continuous comfort and cleanliness of their cows' resting area is paramount. However, cows may find some stall bases or bedding types more comfortable than others. Typical stall bases include mats, mattresses (i.e. rubber- or water-filled) or concrete stalls generously bedded with various materials. Bedding materials can be used to fill a concrete stall, or to top-dress a mat or mattress. These materials generally fall into two categories: inorganic (i.e. sand or lime) or organic (i.e. straw, sawdust, dried manure or composted manure). This article aims to explore cow hygiene, hock lesions, and lying time as indicators of cow comfort in a variety of stall systems.

Prevention of bacterial-induced mastitis begins with good cow hygiene. Hygiene scores can be assigned by ranking degree of udder/hind leg contamination on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 = no manure and 4 = caked with manure. A University of Minnesota survey of 168 farms found that reclaimed sand bedding produced more favorable hygiene scores compared with manure solids, organic bedding, and new sand. In terms of stall base, Colorado State researchers observed more favorable hygiene scores of cows on both mattresses and waterbeds compared to deep-bedded sand, which often sticks to cows' legs. However, somatic cell count, which may be used to monitor milk quality concerns, was not impacted by bedding or stall type in these studies. These results suggest hygiene score, as it relates to bedding or stall type, is not the only factor impacting milk quality on-farm.

Greater lying time is typically associated with lower stress. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada scientists observed that simply adding a mattress to concrete floor stalls increased lying time by 4.2 hours/day. Further, scientists at the University of Wisconsin (UW) observed the longest lying time in deep-bedded sand stalls, followed respectively by mattresses, waterbeds, rubber mats, and concrete. Another group at UW observed lame cows spent more time lying

down (4.3 hr/day) in deep-bedding sand stalls compared to mattress bases, suggesting a preference of sand.

Left unaddressed, painful hock lesions will manifest laminitis. Hock lesions are scored on a scale of 0 to 3 with 3 being most severe. Researchers at Colorado State observed that cows on rubber-filled mattresses demonstrated both greater frequency and severity of lesions than those on waterbeds or sand beds. Conversely, scientists at Cornell did not observe a difference in hock lesion score between cows in sand beds and rubber-filled mattresses. However, stalls bedded deeply with materials other than sand could play a role in mediating hock lesions. Researchers at the University of Minnesota compared operations utilizing both mattresses and stalls deeply bedded with manure solids and found hock lesion frequency was much less severe with the latter stall type.

Sand is often considered the gold standard of bedding types. A UW survey of 325 farms found large farms that used inorganic bedding like sand had both greater milk quality and production (an average addition of 8.5 lbs/cow/day) compared to farms using other bedding materials. Yet, a switch to sand may be too costly for some operations. Regardless of bedding type, deep-bedded stalls appear to provide superior comfort to cows over mats and mattresses. However, an operation currently utilizing mats or mattresses may find it advantageous to add bedding on top of the stall base – the deeper, the better. Ultimately, the choice to upgrade lactating cows' resting area depends upon the operation's long-term goals.

Upcoming Events

Farm Advisory Teams

Contact cmartel@vt.edu or jdaubert@vt.edu to develop a farm advisory team.

Dicamba Training

March 17, 2021, 1:00 pm; contact cmartel@vt.edu
Franklin County

Virginia Spring Holstein Show

May 1, 2021

If you are a person with a disability and require any auxiliary aids, services or other accommodations for any Extension event, please discuss your accommodation needs with the Extension staff at your local Extension office at least 1 week prior to the event.



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**Dr. Christina Petersson-Wolfe,
Dairy Extension Coordinator &
Extension Dairy Scientist,
Milk Quality & Milking Management**

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