The reasons why cows leave the herd are often not recorded accurately. However, the underlying reasons for leaving often start with poor cow comfort and its consequences. This emphasizes the importance of cow comfort with respect to cow longevity.

Cow comfort, a function of the facility and management, is the all encompassing term that reflects the animals’ well being and productivity. Animal welfare is greatest when cows can behave naturally. How cows are housed and managed affects their production, health, and behaviour and consequently longevity and profitability. There are many signs of poor cow comfort – some of the physical lesions are very obvious while some of the behavioural signs are more subtle.

Comfort is important at all times and to every cow in the herd. However, the transition and fresh to mid-lactation periods are particularly critical times to provide optimal cow comfort. There are three major behaviours to consider: eating, resting and rumination. Cow behaviour in these areas and activities is affected by facility design features and decisions made by the producer. The feeding system and stall design are important to ensure that cows are comfortable eating and lying down respectively. However, even when the facility is well designed, producer decisions can introduce stress. Decisions such as overstocking, both pens and bunk, poor grouping strategies and too much time spent away from feed, water and stalls negatively affect cows.

How do we evaluate cow comfort? The main consequence of poor cow comfort is lameness, which leads to reduced milk production and reproductive performance. Other obvious signs are hair loss, abrasions, and swollen hocks that sometimes get infected. There may be other consistent abrasions on cows that indicate that there is a problem with the facility. Cows being dirty, particularly on the hind legs, udder, lower belly and tail, is a sign of poor cow comfort. Looking at the production records, high somatic cell count can usually be associated at least in part with poor cow comfort.

There are slightly more subtle observations that suggest cow comfort is compromised. Cows standing in the stalls or perching for extended periods of time before lying down are a subtle sign of a problem. When cows have difficulty rising in stalls, this indicates that the stalls are incorrectly designed, uncomfortable or that the cows are in some
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discomfort. Too many cows standing in alleys or lying in alleys should alert us to serious comfort problems. Cows suffering from heat stress may not be that obvious to spot since the initial signs may be quite subtle. By the time cows are observed panting, heat stress is quite severe.

Then there are cow comfort aspects that are very difficult to quantify in the barn by simple observation. Adequate lying or resting time is critically important to cows. Cows with less than 12 hours lying time are more likely to reduce feeding time as well. More time resting and ruminating is associated with better rumen health, milk production and better component production. Cows with adequate lying time have less stress on the hoofs, less fatigue stress and greater blood flow to the udder. The extent to which cows are displaced at the bunk reduces feed intake, particularly in submissive cows.

Overstocking is one of the most contentious issues facing producers and has a marked impact on cow comfort. Overstocking interacts with so many other cow comfort parameters; for example cows can’t lie down for 12 hours per day or they don’t have adequate access to feed and water, and there may be problems with mobility in the barn, especially for subordinate or lame cows.

The cumulative effects of poor cow comfort are clearly reflected in poor milk production, poor reproduction and premature culling. This reduces longevity and profitability. 🐄