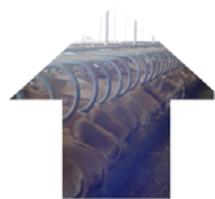


What Kind of Housing Should I Build For My Milking Herd?

By: Jeffrey Bewley, Ph.D.

Recently, a dairy producer I work with indicated he was building a new barn and he asked me what kind of barn he should build. My answer to him was a simple “whichever one you are most comfortable working with.” He was a bit surprised by my answer. Because we have worked extensively with the compost bedded pack barn system in the last few years, he expected me to suggest a compost bedded pack barn. Perhaps, my enthusiasm for the compost bedded pack barn has led some to believe I am a proponent of this system above others. However, this is not the case. I am a proponent of cow comfort and profitability. In my view, this goal can be achieved with freestall barns, tie-stall barns, compost bedded pack barns, and probably some other housing systems we haven’t even dreamed of yet. Ultimately, which system an individual dairy producer chooses depends largely on personal preference, geography, economics, and existing resources and facilities. Or, as my friend Wendy Fulwider (Global Animal Partnership) says, “all dairy facilities can work for cow comfort and welfare, it just depends on which challenges the dairy producer wants to deal with.” Each system can work well when constructed properly and managed well. Each system can be problematic when poorly constructed or mismanaged. The dairy producer asked me to summarize the advantages and disadvantages of each facility type. My opinions are provided in the diagrams below. Deciding which facility to build is a difficult and personal decision. The best way to make this decision is to talk to other dairy producers about their experiences, think about which challenges you want to deal with, and examine the economic implications of your decision closely.

Freestall Barns



Advantages

- Excellent cow comfort
- Potentially improved cow cleanliness and milk quality
- Most researched and used housing system
- Lower risk
- More environmental control
- More animals per square feet of barn
- Automation/management options

Disadvantages

- Poorly designed/maintained freestalls= poor cow comfort
- Excessive time on concrete can lead to feet and leg problems
- Concrete, loops, mattresses can be expensive
- Investment per cow can be limiting for start-ups
- Manure handling (with sand)



What Kind of Housing Should I Build For My Milking Herd?

Compost Bedded Pack Barns



Advantages

- Excellent cow comfort
- Lower investment per cow
- Easier manure handling
- Improved feet and legs
- Minimizes time on concrete
- Expression of natural behavior/estrus
- Works well with varying cow sizes

Disadvantages

- Sawdust availability and costs
- Higher variable costs
- Requires a higher level of management to work well
- Not forgiving of overstocking or management oversights
- Does not work well in retrofits
- Potential mastitis/SCC risks



Tie Stall Barns



Advantages

- Individual cow attention
- Individual cow feeding
- One building for milking and housing
- Family friendly
- Showcase individual cows

Disadvantages

- Labor inefficient
- Physically demanding
- Lack of cow exercise
- Consumer concerns with cows social and behavioral needs

