

Free-Stall Pros and Cons

by

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(Editor's Note: Dieter Krieg, a Penn State dairy science graduate, has drawn on his experience with both stanchion and free stall systems to write this article. Krieg is presently managing a dairy herd for Carl Troop, a Quarryville veterinarian.)

Switching from a conventional to a free-stall barn can be a financially disastrous move. Most dairymen who have made

the change were disappointed at first, at least until they and their cows could adjust to the new system.

There are a number of things to keep in mind if a free-stall, milking parlor operation is in your future. Careful planning will lessen your chances of dissatisfaction.

Adequate feeding and watering facilities are of prime importance. Build feed bunks and hay feeders to take the punishment of cows that are running and shoving freely. Whether feed

prices are high or low, feeding facilities should be constructed to minimize waste of roughages and concentrates. Many loose housing set-ups ignore these simple considerations.

Because free-stall barns are cold, water bowls should either be heated in the winter or placed where freezing is least likely.

Concentrates are normally fed in the milking parlor, and here again, some problems do arise. Among the disadvantages found in parlor feeders are: occasional inaccurate measuring; insufficient time for high producing cows to consume their feed; breakdowns due to moisture and corrosion; if the mechanism breaks, the cow in that stall cannot be fed; and sour feed if the feeders are not cleaned regularly and thoroughly. A pelleted feed is generally the only kind which will work satisfactorily in mechanical feeders.

A frequent problem with converting to free stalls is training the cows to come into the milking parlor. This is always a time when the milker has his patience and temper put on trial, but fortunately is usually only temporary. Most farmers put

their springers, particularly expectant first calf heifers, with the milking string to get them accustomed to the new surroundings. Generally speaking, the conventional barn is much cleaner and more conducive to good "housekeeping" practices than is its counterpart. The sloppy and splattered conditions so often found in loose housing systems are a major contributing factor to cases of septicemia, especially in newborn calves. Too, cows can slip on wet concrete and injure themselves. Slipping becomes especially dangerous in freezing weather, and few herds escape losses from broken legs and fractured pelvises. This hazard can be minimized by avoiding overcrowded conditions, particularly in feeding areas, and insulating the walls and ceiling.

It is absolutely essential that box stalls and a holding area for breeding and veterinary work be included in plans for a free-stall barn. As in any housing system, box stalls are needed for calving, treating injured or sick animals, or for providing some special care for an aged, high producing cow. The maternity, hospital, and

breeding facilities should be equipped with feed troughs, water bowls, and a vacuum line for milking. Again, this may seem obvious, but such considerations have been ignored from time to time. Some thought should also be given to as to where and how the animals will be tested for tuberculosis and brucellosis.

Proper care of calves and heifers is as important as milking the cows. Unfortunately, much of the young stock, which is to provide milk in a year or two, is improperly cared for. Anyone considering construction of a new dairy barn should immediately ask himself: "Where am I going to keep my calves and heifers?" The dairyman who is planning on having his own replacements, but does not house and feed them properly, stands to lose more than he will raise.

The farmer accustomed to providing for his cows on an individual basis, will find that such management procedures are curtailed considerably when his herd moves to loose housing. This inflexibility is especially true if a milking parlor is included in the new surroundings. Cows in the free-stall barns have to fit the system. Stall barn management can be tailored to meet the needs of almost any cow.

Since free-stall barns are usually built without ceilings, ventilation requirements differ somewhat from conventional set-ups. While the movement of air is always important, it is imperative that drafts be avoided.

Automation is one reason farmers often turn to new loose housing. This is fine, but to be realistic about these time and labor saving devices, one must

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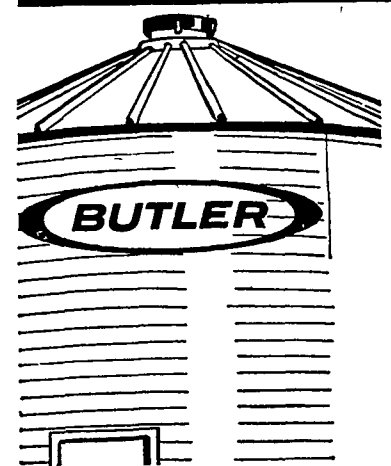
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