

Ag Engineer Looks At Dairy Housing Trends

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YORK (York Co.) — In any discussion about animal facilities, Dan McFarland keeps coming back to a basic set of criteria.

The extension agent from York County will approve of your dairy setup as long as it provides the animals a dry, roomy, well-ventilated area, and offers confident footing and easy access to feed and water.

For “any kind of dairy housing, show me that you have provided those five things,” McFarland said. Beyond those basics, the best type of barn depends on individual preferences and what will best suit the particular operation.

For example, some producers insist they can take better care of their cows in a tie-stall barn. Others claim that they can provide the best care in a free-stall barn/parlor setup.

To McFarland, as long as the animals are well-kept, either kind of facility is fine.

“It absolutely depends on the individual situation,” he said. “Whatever system gets people excited about taking care of their animals gets me excited too.”

In milking center construction, McFarland noted two trends.

One, producers are installing “very simple” swing-type parlors, with greater length than many older parlors. In these setups, cows are milked on alternating sides of the parlor with “swing” milking units. This type of parlor allows the option of adding more units to the already existing structure at some point in the future.

McFarland said he is also seeing a lot of interest in converting tie-stall barns into “step-up” parlors. These offer a relatively inexpensive way to increase milking efficiency. McFarland said step-up parlors are often viewed as a transitional stage until cash flow provides the ability to install a new parallel or herring-

bone “pit” parlor. Some producers, however, are finding “they are very happy” with the step-up parlor, and may be willing to use it for a longer period of time than they originally thought.

One thing dairy farmers should avoid is putting in a system with which they become dissatisfied, but feel they must keep using in order to justify it.

What about the future of automatic milking systems (AMS)?

“While robotic milking may not be for everyone, there may be some factors that play into justifying it,” McFarland said.

Limited availability of labor and increasing preferences for more flexible lifestyles could help promote this relatively new technology in the U.S.

With one AMS unit able to handle 50-60 milk cows, McFarland said that smaller dairies stand to benefit most from this system. In the Netherlands, he pointed out, robotic milking has contributed to the preservation of family farms.

Several Pennsylvania dairies have installed AMS on a trial basis, including the Heindel operation in southern York County.

“Economies of scale are not in its favor at this point,” McFarland said. But while an AMS costs about twice as much per cow as a milking parlor setup, “that’s not saying it’s going to stay there.”

For calf facilities, McFarland said he’s seeing a trend toward more permanent buildings, which in some instances can offer improved shelter and easier care than hutches.

Greenhouse structures can work well for young stock, but managers have to be extra attentive to proper ventilation and temperature control, he said. It’s a good idea to provide hutch-like shelters along with the greenhouse to “let the calf decide” on the most comfortable environment depending on conditions.

‘Notice To The Help’

Remember that this is the Home of Mothers.

Treat each cow as a Mother should be treated.

The giving of milk is a function of Motherhood,
rough treatment lessens the flow.

— H.W. Hoard