

How Belmoral Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Teeswater, Ontario



Mitch Kieffer is the owner and operator of Belmoral Farms in Teeswater, Ontario. At the time of his two Animal Care Assessments, the 80 milking cows were housed in a tie stall barn, but they have since moved to a new sand bedded free stall with 2 robots. Mitch shared his experience making animal care improvements in the tie stall facility.

As an Ontario dairy farmer, Mitch participates in the proAction program and receives regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Belmoral Farms was identified as a farm that showed substantial improvement in reducing hock injuries in their herd over 2 proAction assessments. Here are some of Mitch's perspectives on animal care as an Ontario dairy farmer and the on-farm changes he made to improve the health of his dairy herd.

Animal Care Philosophy.

Mitch's philosophy on animal care is that you get back what you put in. If you are taking good care of the cows, making sure they are clean, comfortable, and healthy, you will reap the benefits. If the cows have everything they need and they're happy, they will pay you back in the bulk tank.

proAction: the Value of Another Set of Eyes.

Mitch's initial thoughts on the proAction Animal Care Assessment were curiosity. Anytime there is something new, he is interested in learning how it works. Mitch thought it was a good experience to get different eyes in the barn and gain an outside look. He appreciated that the assessment broke things down into real numbers and percentages, so he could really see the trends that you can be blind to when you are in the barn every day.

His first and second assessments were done when they milked in their tie stall facility. Before the first assessment, Mitch knew the hocks weren't as good as he would like and that it was an area for improvement. The result of the assessment wasn't a major shock, but seeing the numbers written down was motivating, stating *"ok, I need to do something about that to get that score higher."* He said they always used lots of straw bedding, it was now just a

matter of keeping it where it should be. The assessment gave him *"that kick to fix it."*

A Focus on Bedding.

The solution Mitch came up with was to install a bedding keeper, which is a 3-inch piece of steel tube that went on the back of the stalls. It extended above the mats and the straw pushed against the tube rather than getting pushed into the gutter. The bedding keeper was held on with brackets bolted onto the back of the stall. The height was adjustable so it could be raised or lowered as needed, leaving a space for moisture to get out. **This solution was all about keeping that straw in place and under the cows^a.**

Decisions supported by science.

- Providing large amounts of bedding is the best way to improve stalls. It increases lying times and healing of body injuries.

Statements are supported by the Lameness and Injuries section of the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle: Review of Scientific Research on Priority Issues. 2020.

A Stepwise Approach Led to Progressive Improvement.

Mitch notes they were always good stall managers and the changes they made helped further that. Mitch started small by first installing the bedding keeper in half the barn. This gave them time to see if it worked and once they saw a positive result on the hocks, they then decided to do the entire barn. **They also used this initial trial time to figure out the best spacing for keeping bedding in and letting moisture out^b.** This took some time to dial in, but the time spent was well worth it.

Benefits Across All Age Classes.

Mitch noticed a difference right away in first calf heifers; they didn't suffer hock injuries when they moved into the barn. For older cows, it took a little longer to see an improvement, as injuries take time to heal. After a couple of months, the hock injuries were significantly improved and by the time the next assessment rolled around, the injuries were no longer an issue.



The Return on Investment.

Mitch says they definitely saw a return on the investment. A little more time was needed to keep the stalls clean, but the cow comfort was improved. The bedding keeper wasn't that expensive and they installed it themselves, so it was just the cost of the metal and the welder putting it together. The biggest challenge Mitch noted was that no one made a system like this, it is not something you can buy off the shelf at the local dairy supplier. They needed to use a little creativity to make it from scratch.

Lessons Learned.

Mitch's advice for other farmers who may be having issues with injuries on their farm is simply to try something:

"You gotta try something, you can't just stay there and do the same thing...if you don't want to dive in and do everything right at once, try a small area where you do something different."

— Mitch Keiffer

With the changes he made in bedding management, Mitch was able to give his cows a well-bedded and comfortable place to rest.

Decisions supported by science.

b. Cows and calves have a strong preference for dry bedding.

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Left: The bedding keeper installed at Belmoral Farms.

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