How Chevalley Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers

Moose Creek, Ontario

Husband and wife team, François and Annik own and operate their family dairy farm, Chevalley. The 80 cow tie-stall facility has been around for over 2 decades and has been updated over the years to provide new, wider stalls, an extended barn for an improved dry cow and heifer area, and a fully automatic feeding system. Annik and François take pride in their work and their cows, seeing animal welfare as a priority that not only improves cow comfort, but production as well.

As Ontario dairy farmers, Annik and François participate in the proAction program and receive regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Chevalley was identified as a farm that showed substantial improvement in reducing lameness in their herd over 2 proAction assessments. Here are some of Annik and François' perspectives on animal care as Ontario dairy farmers and the on-farm changes they made to improve the health of their dairy herd.

Animal Care is Standard Practice.

At Chevalley, prioritizing animal care leads to improved animal welfare and increased production. Making on-farm changes to improve cow comfort leads to better production outcomes and positive results overall. For Annik and François, prioritizing cow comfort and animal welfare is standard practice, and as they put it, simply the right thing to do.

Their first proAction Animal Care assessment back in 2011 identified that lameness could be improved in Annik and François' herd. While they already knew that this was an area for improvement, François and Annik decided to make some on-farm changes to address other challenges as well, such as neck and hock injuries, reducing heat stress, and improving overall cow comfort.

Redesigning the Barn to Prioritize Cow Comfort.

Along with some smaller-scale changes, the stalls at Chevalley were re-designed to maximize the comfort of their tie-stall cows. **The number of stalls in the barn was reduced to allow for bigger stalls that could better fit their cows[a].** Increasing the stall size showed some improvement, but issues with hocks and feet were still present, so they decided to switch out their mats for new waterbeds. This showed a tremendous improvement, with cows recovering quicker from lameness, reducing the incidence of lameness and hock injuries, and improving the overall comfort of the cows. While it wasn't feasible to put waterbeds in every stall, François and Annik took a strategic approach to cow housing to maximize the impact of this new bedding system. Older cows, dry cows, and cows that showed signs of lameness were prioritized to be housed on the waterbeds. **François and Annik felt that the wider stalls, new waterbeds, and strategic housing drastically improved the health of their animals, stating that these changes alone improved cow longevity[b].**

Decisions supported by science.

a. Proper housing design, such as stalls with ample space and properly positioned tie rails and neck rails, as well as the use of deep bedding, are factors that can help to reduce the prevalence of injuries. Longer and wider stalls have been associated with increased cattle lying times and decreased injuries.

b. Housing management practices are critical factors for lameness. This includes stall design, bedding type, stall base, and bedding depth. Small stalls with large cows have been associated with greater lameness.

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 Holistic Approach to Improving Cow Comfort.

The proAction Assessment in 2011 identified issues with lameness; however, François and Annik knew that they could take things a step further to improve all aspects of animal care on their farm. Improving cow comfort includes looking at the whole picture, so while the changes made to stalls, mats, and cattle housing improved lameness and hock injuries, Annik and François noticed that improvements could still be made. **Due to the placement of the neck rail in their stalls, the cows were experiencing neck injuries that needed to be addressed[c].** François and Annik looked to other tie-stall systems to find a solution for this problem but didn't have any luck. It wasn't until they went to see a freestall barn that they came up with the idea of using a flexible bar for their neck rails. The freestall farm that they visited was using Flex Stalls, a new method of housing that utilizes flexible green tubes for stall dividers. François and Annik thought that this innovative system would work well in their tie-stall barn, so they replaced their neck rails with the flexible tubes and saw improvements immediately. The flexibility of the new rails allowed larger cows to more easily move around, access food, and adjust within the stall. They were able to remove their electric trainers and immediately saw a reduction in the number of neck injuries from cows rubbing and pushing on the rail. When summer time came around, the tunnel ventilation system in the barn wasn't doing enough to keep the cows cool. Again, François and Annik took inspiration from a freestall system and installed water jets for their cows. The jets worked to keep the cows cool and improved cow comfort right away.

Seeing the Benefits.

The changes made on-farm showed results immediately in the way of increased production and improved animal health. François and Annik noted that after making improvements to their farm, they not only saw a reduction in lameness, and hock and neck injuries, but other issues resolved themselves as well. Now that the cows had bigger stalls, they saw less down cows, the cows were more comfortable, and longevity was improved. Since the cows were happier and healthier, they were doing better over more lactations, which allowed Annik and François the ability to have more control over which cows remained in the herd and which cows left the herd. Not only was production greatly improved, but the replacement rate on the farm decreased as well. Being able to keep cows for longer and reducing the number of replacements needed ended up improving calf health and welfare as well, since they did not experience overcrowding in their calf area any longer.

While some of the benefits from these changes were seen immediately, others took a few years to come into effect. Some changes, such as renovating the stalls, were more of a time and financial investment, whereas other changes, like the flex bars, were a quicker and less expensive project. François and Annik made these improvements to their farm over a number of years, highlighting the importance of continuous improvement and making steady progress over time.

Taking Inspiration from Other Farmers.

Other farmers were a huge help for Annik and François when it came to getting inspiration for how to make improvements on their farm. Visiting other farms and discussing things with other farmers was an important part of the process and helped inspire some of the changes that François and Annik ended up implementing on their farm. Annik and François are also part of a farm management group, which includes 75 other farmers that they can chat with and receive recommendations from. This group has allowed them to compare their farm to others and benchmark how well they are doing compared to their peers. Through this process, Annik and François noticed that they were getting rid of more cows and had higher vet expenses than some of their peers, which inspired them to look for opportunities to make a change.

When it comes to recommendations for other farmers, Annik and François say that the best and easiest way to get ideas about how to improve your farm is to talk to other farmers about their experiences, the cost of certain elements, and their perspectives on what has worked for them in the past. They have also built strong relationships with their veterinarian and nutritionist, whom they feel have been great supports throughout this journey.

At Chevalley, continuous improvement has been a goal for many years, with cow comfort being a priority above it all. Annik and François have worked diligently over the years to ensure that they are providing the best care possible to their cows, while also working to improve their system and maximize their production. Keeping animal care at the forefront and leaning on other producers in their community have been key aspects for François and Annik on their journey to continuous improvement and cow comfort.

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c. Low neck-rails (< 140 cm in height) have been associated with a higher prevalence of injuries.

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