

How Cranberry Creek Dairy Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Kars, Ontario



Jake Meeks is a dairy farmer in Kars, Ontario where he manages Cranberry Creek Dairy Farms. The farm milks around 130 cows in a free stall barn. They are a robot herd but recently added a milking parlour to reduce pressure on the robots. This addition created the best of both worlds for the farm; with robots not being overstocked and more options for training heifers and milking cows that don't suit the robots.

As an Ontario dairy farmer, Jake participates in the proAction program and receives regular on-farm assessments like all other farmers across Canada. Cranberry Creek Dairy 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 Jake'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.

The farm has diversified over the years, with raising steers and cash cropping. As a consequence of the diversification, Jake reports he is busier than ever. He loves the cows but his time in the barn is now more limited. This isn't all bad, as Jake has had to become a better manager and delegator. He credits his staff and excellent communication amongst everyone on the dairy for their success. Jake leads with an expectation that everyone reports any cow issues they notice back to him.

A Straightforward Philosophy for Animal Care.

Jake's philosophy on animal care is to treat the cows the way you would want to be treated. He doesn't go in for breakfast before the cows are fed. The farm focuses on creating a low stress environment for the cows, ensuring cows are moved calmly with no raised voices. When Jake first heard about the proAction Animal Care Assessment he wasn't concerned, as he didn't think they had any major problems. However, when opportunities to improve were identified for lameness in particular, Jake was quick to take action in a number of key areas.

It Starts with a Focus on Feet.

Being a robot herd, it is particularly important to keep the cows happy on their feet, as sound cows will visit the robot more often. Prior to his proAction assessment, Jake used to trim every 3 months and 20% of the cows would be treated for digital dermatitis. To address the lameness in his herd, they made numerous changes to improve hoof health, including: **hoof trimming more frequently, with every cow seeing the hoof trimmer multiple times per lactation^a**, switching to a new footbath product, and they started footbathing on a regular basis. The footbath Jake had made for the exit lane of the robots was not expensive. It was made locally out of thick stainless steel with rubber mats on the bottom.

Decisions supported by science.

- a. Frequent preventative hoof trimming is associated with a lower prevalence of 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.

For Jake, the footbath is not expensive to run and was a great return on investment. Other hoof health changes made within the barn focused on reducing forces on the cows' feet, including reducing overcrowding and changing the timing of the automatic alley scrapers to avoid cows needing to step over it. With these changes, Jake has seen the number of digital dermatitis cases drop dramatically.

Taking a Closer Look at the Dry Cows.

Jake knew from experience that lameness in dry cows can get out of control very easily and he wanted to prevent cows from coming back from their dry period lame. Footbathing the dry cows is a challenge, as it isn't part of their routine and it can be hard to push them down the barn and through the robot. To make up for this, the cows are seen by the hoof trimmer more frequently, including during the dry period.

Jake encourages other farmers to make hoof trimming easier and more efficient with better gate setups^b. Having a better barn design for sorting and restraining cows ensures the job gets done and creates fewer headaches.

Improving Efficiency and Oversight with Records and Visual Assessment.

Jake is now doing a better job with paperwork and keeping track of hoof trimmings. With this added oversight, he can better time hoof trimmings for each cow. Jake also emphasizes the importance of walking the barns to look for lameness and other issues. He is always watching the cows and all of the staff know what to look for and can report any issues they notice.

It Takes a Team.

Jake says they are fortunate to have a good team of advisors, and particularly credits their nutritionist, Robin Gowan from Agribrands Purina. Robin has worked closely with Jake for 8 years and has seen a lot of growth and improvement during that time. Robin walks the herd every time he's at the farm and likes to observe the cows for body condition, standing, waiting, and injuries. **He is always thinking about the experience of the cows in the facility and has made suggestions to improve cow flow and avoid overcrowding^c.** Jake encourages farmers to ask for help and to work as a team with their advisors. He also advises farmers to call their Field Service Representative (FSR) if they have a problem, as FSRs are there to give guidance. Jake wants to work with advisors who can act as a second set of eyes on the farm and aren't afraid to challenge him.

It's About Continuous Improvement, Not Perfection.

Jakes knows that animal care is all about improvement, as things will never be perfect. He suggests farmers try not to panic because every farm has problems, *"don't beat yourself up...do little bits at a time"* and when it comes to working on a problem, *"make your budget and make your plan."* He says problems won't be solved overnight and it is all about slowly working to make things better.

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Decisions supported by science.

- b. Careful consideration around handling is important for the safety of cows and people. Cows that are stressed and rushed are at higher risk of injury.
- c. Overcrowding is associated with the development of white line and sole ulcer hoof lesions.



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