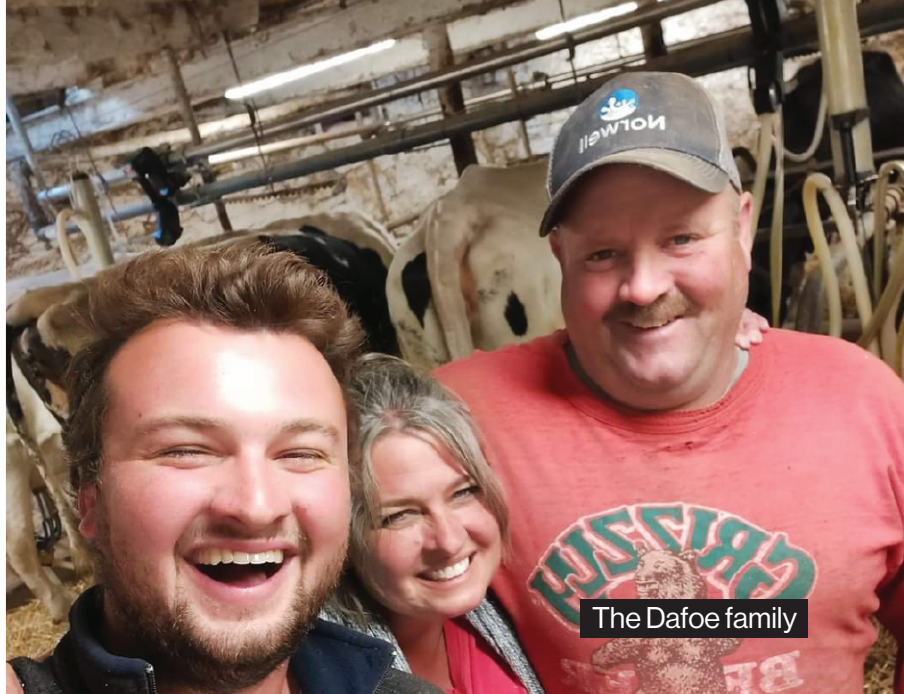


How Dalock Farms Improved Animal Care

Lessons learned from Ontario dairy farmers



Havelock, Ontario



The Dafoe family

Tracy Dafoe, with her husband and son, milks 57 cows in a tie-stall barn in Havelock, Ontario. Their family is the 4th generation on this farm and they have a mixed herd of Holsteins and Jerseys. They have an older bank barn with a newer addition, and because of this, they have stalls of various sizes. In addition to the tie stalls, their facility also includes a small pack for milk cows.

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

Committing to Their Animal Care Philosophy Through Action.

When it comes to animal care, Tracy's philosophy is to look after your cows and they will look after you. She tries to stay in tune with the cows and the facility, striving to make an environment that best suits her animals.

Initially when she heard about the Animal Care Assessment, she was not excited about it, "*oh no, we have more bookwork to do!*" Ultimately, she found the record keeping to be a benefit to the farm. Staying on top of the record keeping became a part of the daily routine and all of the information related to their cows is available for them to look back on if they need to.

Reflecting on the farm's first proAction Animal Care Assessment, Tracy said a number of opportunities for improvement were identified. Tracy thought it was a great learning experience and encourages other farmers to engage in the process and ask questions. The result of the Animal Care Assessment wasn't surprising to Tracy as she already knew they needed attention in some areas related to cow comfort.

A Focus on Lying Surface.

To make the necessary reduction in hock and knee injuries, Tracy looked to the surface that the cows were lying on^a. The mats were worn out and needed to be replaced. They weren't working in the facility anymore as the straw bedding easily shifted and didn't stay where it was needed to provide comfort and cleanliness for the cows. Tracy took the time to find and apply to a government funding program, the Dairy Farm Investment Program, and with this funding they replaced the mats. Tracy notes that it was hugely beneficial to the farm to take advantage of the funding used to replace the mats. They saw an increase in milk production and an improvement in the overall well being of the cows.

Decisions supported by science.

- a. It is expected that better cushioning helps in recovery from injuries. However, more research is needed on lying surfaces and recovery from 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.

Matching Cows to Their Stall.

Another change Tracy made to reduce neck injuries was to be more mindful of matching the cows with their stalls. Tracy looks at the size of the cow and finds a spot for her that is the best match within their facility. Smaller cows can fit in the older stalls, bigger cows need to be in the newer, larger stalls. If cows are not doing well in the tie stall, they get moved to the pack barn. **They are able to take advantage of having the pack barn and the ability to relocate cows to the environment that works best for them^b.**

Taking the Time to Address Growing Pains.

Change is not without challenges. Cows are creatures of habit and they don't always adapt well to change, for example, some cows do not want to move to a new stall or go outside for exercise. Tracy noted the importance of taking the time to work with the cows and gradually get them comfortable with their new environment. With a little time and patience, Tracy was able to help her cows adapt.

Communication is Key.

Posted on Tracy's bulletin board in the milk house are three words, "*communication is key.*" Having a great line of communication with everyone involved in animal care is so important, including the hoof trimmer, veterinarian, and nutritionist. Tracy said a key to their success is keeping great relationships with advisors and they are very fortunate to work with an excellent team. Tracy says sending a simple text message can be just enough to get the answer that you need, you don't necessarily need a herd visit. Rob Walsh, the Dafoe family's herd veterinarian, also recognized the importance of having ongoing conversations with farms so that together they can find ways to make things better for the cows.

Consistency is Also Key.

Tracy talked about the importance of being consistent on the cow care front, always watching the cows and taking note of how they are doing. "*Taking note of any little thing, a little issue can turn into a huge issue, if it is looked after promptly, it doesn't get out of hand on you.*" **The proAction Animal Care Assessment, paired with the discussions they had with advisors, helped them to see the importance of being more consistent in the practices that they were already doing, like getting the tie stall cows outside for daily exercise^c.**

Lessons Learned and Advice for Other Farmers.

Now, with the improvements that they have made, Tracy no longer needs to do corrective action plans. That paperwork job is now gone, and she is thrilled with that! Tracy shared some advice she has for other farmers who are working to improve animal care. "*Talk to other producers, if you're at a meeting or at the feed store, 'what would you do in a case like this?' don't be afraid to ask that question.*" Tracy knows lots of things can work, you just need to find what works with your facility and the experience of other farmers can be invaluable.



Decisions supported by science.

- b. Stalls that are too restrictive for cows' body dimensions are a risk factor for injuries and lameness. Wider stalls are associated with increased ease of movement and decreased injuries and lameness in tie stalls.
- c. Providing outdoor access to dairy cows is associated with numerous health and welfare benefits. These include: decreased prevalence of lameness, increased blood flow to the feet and legs, better hoof health, and a reduction in injuries.

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